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THE SNARE OF THE FOWLER.

THE
SNARE OF THE FOWLER.

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER,

AUTHOR OF "THE WOOING O'T," "THE FRERES," "SECOND LIFE,"
"MONA'S CHOICE," ETC. ETC.

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THE SNARE OF THE FOWLER.



CHAPTER I.

MATTERS OF BUSINESS.

AMONG the passengers who alighted at Earl's Court from a Mansion House train one fine warm afternoon in July, was a short, dapper, wiry man, of uncertain age. He was exceedingly fresh and spruce in his attire, with light hay-coloured hair, whiskers a shade or two darker, and green-grey twinkling eyes. He carried a tightly rolled umbrella in one hand, and in the other a professional-looking black bag, new and shiny. His air and bearing were almost offensively prosperous and self-satisfied.

He ran actively up-stairs, apologised effusively to a lady with whom he had almost come into collision, and leaving the station took the first turning on the right, which is that well-known and highly respectable

street, Melford Road, which debouches on the older thoroughfare called Salisbury Avenue.

The houses were of the correct "Queen Anne" pattern, in red brick, with bay windows, balconies, porches, and pediments, but on a diminished scale; a quiet, orderly street, where the curtains usually looked fresh and the brasses were conscientiously polished. Yet not a street suggestive of wealth or luxury—rather of genteel independence and severe self-respect.

With a certain air of familiarity the spruce wayfarer walked straight to the door of a house half-way down on the left side, and rang.

The door was promptly opened by a grave-looking servant in black, with a beautiful white apron and cap, the latter decorated with black ribbons.

"Can I see Mrs. Dallas?" asked the visitor.

"Yes, sir; this way, sir," and she preceded him upstairs, past a small well-kept conservatory, to a door draped with some "greenery-yallery" art stuff; opening which, she ushered him into a pretty, comfortable drawing-room, saying in a subdued tone, "Mr. Deedes, if you please, 'm."

A lady who was sitting at a writing-table in the usual smaller back room rose and came forward to

meet him—a tall lady, with a remarkably graceful, though rather full, figure. She was dark—very dark, and pale; but her lips were red—redder than seemed quite natural. She was carefully dressed in fresh widow's weeds, and her thick black hair showed in strong contrast to the soft snowy whiteness of her cap.

"You are very good to come so early," she said, with a smile, while her great lustrous dark eyes looked kindly on him, as she held out her hand—a very small hand, but darker than her face, and glittering with gems; she spoke low, with some deliberation, and her voice sounded slightly guttural: "I know you are a very busy man."

"Your affairs are my business at present," said Mr. Deedes, in a friendly but respectful tone. "I have brought the papers you wished to see." He laid his bag on a small ottoman, and took the chair to which she pointed.

"I trust you feel more composed—more yourself?"

"Thank you! I find work my best help—and I have much to do."

"Just so; yet you are spared much trouble and vexation by your late husband's action in settling his

property on you during his lifetime. It has also saved you a considerable sum."

The lady sighed.

"He was always so infinitely thoughtful for me in every way—too thoughtful. The present is unspeakably desolate, now that his helping hand is withdrawn from me for ever." She paused abruptly, as though striving to control her feelings.

Mr. Deedes preserved a sympathetic silence, and seemed to study the pattern of the carpet with much attention.

"I must not waste your time, my dear sir," she resumed, in a firmer voice. "I have asked you for this information as I must know how I stand exactly before I make any plans; and I confess I feel anxious for change of air and scene."

"Very naturally! I do not think there is much unknown to you in Colonel Dallas's affairs. That sum of five thousand three hundred, which you very wisely induced him to invest in Indian railway shares, is now worth three-eighths per cent. more than he bought in. I have brought you a list of securities, and some notes as to the mortgage."

He proceeded to unlock his bag and produce

sundry documents which he and his client discussed for the next quarter of an hour with a degree of comprehension on the lady's part that, if possible, increased the respectful admiration with which her legal adviser regarded her. He had begun to return some of the papers to their receptacle, and to lay aside others to be retained by Mrs. Dallas, when she rose and rang the bell.

"I am forgetting that you must sorely need a cup of tea," she said, with her grave, soft smile. "How selfish sorrow and preoccupation make one!—Tea at once," she added, when the servant appeared. "It is indeed fortunate that my dear husband's care spared me the cost of proving his will and of succession duty. As it is, I shall have a greatly diminished income—his half-pay and pension are very inadequately replaced by the small amount left to me. Do not imagine I complain; my tastes and habits are simple enough, but I feel anxious to push my son's fortunes. You know he failed, through ill-health, to pass for the Indian Civil Service, and I succeeded in getting him into Messrs. Overton and Colville's house—they are connections of his father, my first husband. He seems to be doing well, but he *has* cost me

money. However, I thank Heaven this tie is left to me."

She rose and went to a small tea-table near the bay window, through which came the scent of flowers. The tea was daintily served, though the equipage was inexpensive, save for a pretty, old-fashioned silver tea-pot; but the tea itself was fragrant and of the best; the thin brown bread-and-butter was fresh, and the biscuits were delicate and crisp. Mr. Deedes was evidently quite alive to the merits of afternoon tea, and for a few minutes there was silence, while the fair widow's guest imbibed the cheering cup.

"You were, I think, somewhat uneasy respecting that five thousand," he resumed. "But it is quite safe. It is included in the deed of gift which the colonel executed little more than a year ago. I suppose the late Mr. Frederic Dallas left little or no property?"

Mrs. Dallas shook her head. "A mere trifle—the remains of his capital, on which he had been living for some years," she replied. "He was indeed a rolling stone, poor fellow! I never saw him, but my husband was greatly attached to him, though they rarely met after their boyish days. It is from a

desire to carry out his wishes that I have, perhaps imprudently, undertaken the supervision and partial support of Mr. Frederic Dallas's daughter."

"His daughter? I thought he died unmarried?"

"He did, I am very sorry to say, which makes the case a peculiarly hard one. Colonel Dallas, when he retired and left India to join me in London, travelled from Brindisi to Munich, where his brother had resided for some time. My husband found him dying of fever, too far gone to speak, but I believe he made some gesture as if he would commit this girl to his brother's care. So Colonel Dallas, who was most generous and impulsive, brought her to me. I confess I thought it extremely imprudent, and I persuaded him to place her at school. She was only fifteen, terribly untrained, and altogether difficult. I have impressed upon her the necessity of fitting herself to earn her own bread."

"Of course, of course—poor young thing!" ejaculated Deedes. "It is a painful position."

"Exceedingly painful," returned Mrs. Dallas. "Justly or unjustly, there is a prejudice against persons so situated, and this girl's conduct is not calculated to remove it. She is headstrong, and

somewhat inclined to coquetry; indeed, I do not care to have her in the house with my son. It might be well to tell her the truth about herself, but Colonel Dallas was always averse to letting her know. In fact, he was perhaps weakly tender towards her; but I hardly like to go against his wishes now he is gone."

"It would do no good to destroy her respect for her parents," said the lawyer gravely. "Such knowledge might harden as well as mortify her."

"It is impossible to say," returned Mrs. Dallas coldly, and paused; then, with a change of tone, she resumed, "I have not found the papers you thought might be amongst my late husband's, but I have not looked through half of them yet; there are some of his brother's also, and the leases may be among them. The property is of little value, you say?"

"Little or none; merely a couple of tumble-down houses in a country town; but as these are the only part of his estate not included in the deed of gift to yourself, why, we must hand them over to Captain Forrester, his next-of-kin."

"He is but a second or third cousin," said the widow, in a regretful tone.

"Even so; Colonel Dallas had no nearer relative; the family has dwindled sadly of late years."

"I imagine it must have almost died out with my husband," she said thoughtfully. "Take another cup of tea, Mr. Deedes?"

"Thank you! I really must exceed my usual allowance; it is too good."

After some further talk respecting investments and affairs generally, the lawyer rose to take leave, when a young man entered somewhat abruptly, exclaiming, "Mother!" Then, seeing Deedes, he paused, and added, "I did not know you were engaged!"

"Good-day, Mr. Ashby," said the lawyer. "I need not trouble Mrs. Dallas any longer; I was just wishing her good-morning."

"You must not let me shorten your visit," returned Ashby, politely offering his hand.

He was like his mother, though darker and less good-looking. His eyes especially resembled hers, save that they were sleepy-looking and more watchful. He was scarcely above middle height, slender and gracefully made, but decidedly un-English in aspect; a very slight jet-black moustache marked his upper lip, and an almost constant caressing half-smile

showed a range of dazzlingly white teeth. He looked like a mother's darling, and Mrs. Dallas's great dark eyes softened as they rested on him.

"I met Myra as I came up from the train," he said, addressing her. "She was coming here. Will you see her?"

Mrs. Dallas hesitated half a moment, and then said—

"Yes, tell her to come up."

Young Ashby turned, and left the room, and his mother said quickly, in a low voice—

"*This* is the girl we spoke of! You will understand my objections when you see her."

She had hardly uttered the words, when her son returned, and held the door open to permit a young lady in rather rusty black to walk in.

She was tall and slight, with a white face, and eyes of rare, real dark blue—very sad, nearly tearful eyes. A lot of nut-brown hair was turned back from her face, and not too tidily twisted in a roll, which showed below her shabby black straw hat, with its bows and ends of dusty black ribbon. Her skin was delicately but not pinkly fair, and though her nose was of the *retroussé* order, it seemed more pathetic

than saucy ; an expressive mouth, not very small, was trying to smile, and succeeding tremulously, as she approached Mrs. Dallas, who rose and held out her hand.

“ Well, Myra ! ” she said.

“ Oh ! ” exclaimed Myra, catching the hand in both her own, “ I am so awfully sorry for you ! Such a terrible loss as yours must break your heart. Why—why—would you not let me see him once, only once before he died ? He was my best, my only friend.”

“ Do not excite yourself,” said Mrs. Dallas gently. “ The colonel deserved your deepest gratitude, and if you prove it by following my advice, you will find a friend in me.”

Myra let go her hand, and pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, wept silently for a minute or two, while Mr. Deedes, looking on with a keen sense of discomfort, thought that Mrs. Dallas’s fear of this interesting, impulsive girl was not unfounded.

“ I must wish you good-morning,” he said hurriedly. “ You will let me know when you have completed your search ; or should you wish to see me before ? ”

“ Thank you, my dear sir ! I can never forget your ever-ready kindness.”

“Shrewd, sensible woman! and deuced handsome,” was the little lawyer’s reflection as he left the house. “Shouldn’t wonder if she found another husband. Sorry for that poor child, but I daresay the aunt—no, not her aunt—her father’s sister-in-law—will be a kind, judicious friend to her.”

“I don’t want *him* listening and prying here,” thought his client.

“Take some tea, Myra!” she said aloud, in a civil tone. “Try not to give way to grief; self-control is a great power to all, but to those who have their bread to win, it is absolutely essential.”

“I am sure I know that!” returned Myra. “And I believe I am better than I used to be! but when I think that I shall never, never see Uncle Edward again, or hear his voice, I can’t keep back the tears! I could scream out!”

“Pray do not,” said Mrs. Dallas, “or people will think I have a private lunatic asylum!” and she looked rather sternly at her husband’s niece. “People have been shut up for such unbridled emotion before this! *My* loss is greater than yours, and I do not cry or scream!”

"Ah! you have your son; I have no one!" said Myra, trying to control herself.

"I wish my mother's son could console you, Myra," said Ashby, with a long look at the weeping girl. "Do dry your eyes, and take some tea or a glass of wine!"

Myra was silent for another moment, evidently struggling to compose herself; then she said wearily—

"No, thank you, I do not want anything."

"Why did you want to see me, then, Myra?" asked Mrs. Dallas.

"I had waited so long thinking you would send for me, I grew afraid you would never see me again; and though I know you do not like me, I do not want to be thrown off and—and disowned; then Mrs. Fairchild constantly asks me what I am going to do, and I do not know what to say!"

"I daresay," replied Mrs. Dallas thoughtfully. "No one likes to be burdened with a girl—a helpless girl. What do you think of doing yourself, Myra?"

"I—I don't know. Have I no money at all, aunt?"

Mrs. Dallas shook her head sadly.

"But," urged Myra, "my father had some? We

were not rich, but we had a servant, and everyone was paid somehow !”

“Your father was an artist, and, I suppose, sold his pictures.”

“Very few of them ; and latterly he painted very little. He was so unwell for a long time,” replied Myra.

“Then I fear he must have spent his capital ; at any rate, you may be sure your uncle did not rob you. For his sake, Myra, I am going to make you an allowance—something to help you to work for yourself—for you cannot expect me to support you altogether.”

“No, certainly not ! I wish I could do without any help from you. I may later. What can I do ? I hate teaching ; and I know nothing well enough—I would rather be a servant !”

“Nonsense, Myra ! You have had great advantages : you speak German, Italian, and I believe you draw, you play——”

“I do *nothing* well,” ejaculated Myra, with a desponding gesture.

“More shame for you, then. I hope you are not lazy ! However, I shall have a consultation with Mrs.

Fairchild, who is very friendly to you, as soon as I see what allowance I can make you; and you must remember you are no relation of mine, and you have no claim upon me."

"I know that very well!" said Myra, with increasing composure; "it is an act of charity on your part to give me anything; but I thought, I *did* think, my dear good uncle would have remembered me—would have——"

She stopped abruptly, struggling to keep back her tears. Ashby shifted his seat nearer to her, and whispered in her ear.

"Well, Myra, I assure you *I* did not influence him against you," said Mrs. Dallas, with cold composure.

"I do not say you did. I do not suppose you did," said Myra. "I daresay he did not think of me! Why should he? After all, I had no real claim upon him! But I told you I only came to ask you what I ought to say to Mrs. Fairchild. This morning she told me she had great difficulty in finding a German governess, and if I would undertake the class for two or three months, she would give me five pounds a quarter."

"That is a fair offer," replied Mrs. Dallas. "What did you say in reply?"

"I said I would ask you. I could teach German pretty well; and then I might paint a little."

"You had better ask Mrs. Fairchild to call on me to-morrow afternoon, if she can, and we will arrange something, at all events for the present."

"I will, aunt; but she is busy; she is going to Ramsgate next week. Still, I know she wants to see you."

There was a moment's silence; then, with heightened colour, Myra turned to Ashby, and said abruptly—

"I wish you would go away, Lionel! I want to speak to—to your mother."

"Very well," said the young man, rising slowly. "But you need not mind me."

As soon as the door closed behind him, Myra drew her chair nearer to Mrs. Dallas, and looking earnestly at her as if seeking for sympathy, she said hesitatingly—

"I am so sorry to trouble you, but—but this is my only dress, and all the money I possess is tenpence-halfpenny."

"I do not imagine you are a good manager," returned Mrs. Dallas, knitting her brows. "However, I am willing to give you some money on account

of the allowance I shall make you; but pray be prudent."

She rose and took a note-book out of the drawer of her writing-table, from which she extracted a new, clean five-pound note. "There, Myra, make that go as far as you can. I would close with Mrs. Fairchild's offer; and I may as well say that you may count on five pounds a quarter from *me*, so long as you conduct yourself to my satisfaction."

Myra looked at her with surprise.

"I did not think you would have been so generous to me, aunt!" she exclaimed. "I wish you liked me better, so that I might feel more warmly grateful to you; but I am obliged, very much obliged. One day I may earn enough to maintain myself; then I should be glad to relieve you, aunt."

"I wish to be just, Myra, and I hope that gratitude to me will induce you to discourage my son's foolish fancy for you, which you know annoys me. It is but a passing whim, but——"

"I always *do* discourage him!" interrupted Myra somewhat vehemently. "I do not want his whims or his fancies, and I have no fancy for him, as you know very well, aunt."

"I know nothing about what you feel or pretend to feel," said Mrs. Dallas, with an angry flash from her big black eyes. "But I beg you will not call me 'aunt,' now that your uncle is no more; there is no connection between us."

"I shall not forget, Mrs. Dallas," returned Myra, the tears gathering in her eyes. "I will not intrude any longer upon you."

"Stay, Myra; you must give me an acknowledgment for that five pounds. Now you must expect no more for three months."

She traced a few lines and gave Myra the pen to sign them.

Then that young lady drew on her much-mended glove, and looking straight into the black eyes so sternly bent upon her, said—

"I will not offer you my hand, for I do not think you would like to take it. But I *am* thankful that for my dear uncle's sake you are generous to me. Good-bye." She was gone before Mrs. Dallas could reply.

"That girl is a puzzle to me," she thought, her eyes still fastened on the door by which she had disappeared. "Is she stupidly proud and distrustful?"

or is she stupid only? I never could make her out! As to her indifference to Lionel, that is rank affectation, probably to conceal some design upon the foolish boy. It is amazing that any man can care for such a colourless piece of unformed femininity; and yet how fond the colonel would have been of her! Well, it is a costly experiment, but I have done well in stopping her mouth. She will not trouble me much more."

She returned to her seat by the tea-table, and sat for some minutes in deep thought.

Meanwhile Myra descended the stairs slowly, and was passing through the hall when the dining-room door opened, and Lionel Ashby came out to interrupt her progress.

"I cannot let you go back alone, Myra, though you will not deign to give me your confidence!"

"Oh! no! no, Lionel! You must not come with me; I really do not want you. I am accustomed to go about alone, and it is quite unnecessary to make any fuss about me."

"No matter! If you do not want me, I want you, Myra! You shall not treat me with such coldness and contempt," he added, his dark cheek mantling.

“You are silly and provoking! I cannot let you come—you will only vex your mother and—— Let me pass, Lionel!”

“Yes, you may pass,” he said, stepping aside, “but I will come with you to St. John’s Wood.”

He took his hat from its peg, and followed her down the steps.

“You only annoy me, Lionel,” she exclaimed, as he walked beside her. “And I am not going to St. John’s Wood!”

“Then where on earth *are* you going?” in a tone of great surprise.

“To my friend Mrs. Keene.”

“What! To that inn-keeping woman! I can’t say you have very refined taste, Myra; and you know my mother does not like you to go to these low people.”

“I cannot help that! Your mother has just told me I am not to consider myself her niece any longer, which has vexed me because she was treating me generously at the same time; but Mrs. Keene is perfectly respectable, and her house is a private hotel. I only go to her own room, and see no one but herself and her grand-daughter. She is the only friend I

have, and I am not going to give her up to please you or your mother. I wish you would go back! Mrs. Dallas will be so annoyed!—not more than I am.”

“Why are you so unkind, so hard, Myra? Why will you not love me? Other girls are ready enough to listen to me. Why are you so proud and disdainful?”

“I am not disdainful! I just do not like you—that is, in the way you want—and I never shall. You are too conceited. You had better put me out of your thoughts and amuse yourself with the girls who *do* appreciate you.”

“It is no question of amusing myself, Myra. It is something too deep for that! I wonder,” he went on, a fierce light coming into his eyes, “I wonder you are not afraid of treating me so scornfully.”

“Oh, nonsense! You don’t carry a poniard, do you?” showing a row of small pearly teeth as she laughed good-humouredly.

“You drive me mad! And I so seldom have a chance of speaking to you.”

“I wish you would go back! There—there is my omnibus. What is the use of sitting in a disagreeable crowded omnibus, where you cannot speak a word

to me? besides, I think there is only room for one more. There, it has stopped! Good-bye! Don't be cross—I do not want to vex you!”

A smile, a quick wave of the hand, and she vanished into the capacious vehicle.

Lionel Ashby stood for a moment looking after it with a curious, angry, longing glance, while the small brown hand with its dark nails, which hung by his side, clenched itself tightly, and he murmured something—not exactly a blessing. Then he turned and walked sharply back to his mother's house.

Entering with a latch-key, he met the servant carrying down the tea-things, and found Mrs. Dallas still sitting in deep thought in the window.

She looked up as he entered.

“You foolish boy!” she said, with a frown. “You have taken the trouble of escorting Myra to the train, or the omnibus, and you know how these attentions annoy me. I would rather follow you to your grave than see you committed to marriage with Myra! She is no match for you or for any gentleman!”

“Well, my dear mother, at present she is the only woman—the only girl—who could induce me to think of marriage, and that is probably because she does not

want me. No match for me! *She*, I assure you, does not consider me a match for her."

"Her insolence is intolerable! I trust you will see no more of her. I am going to give her a handsome allowance out of my husband's money, and wash my hands of her."

✱ "An allowance!" repeated the young man with immense surprise. "Why, what—what for Heaven's sake induces you to do such a thing? It is not like you."

"Because I think it right. Because I have good reasons, you may be sure."

"I should think you had!" he ejaculated; "though I am pretty sure you will not tell me."

"Not now, Lionel; but if you are guided by me and give her up, if you will turn your thoughts and fancies elsewhere, I will take you into my confidence and show you all my plans; and I have great ambitions for you, my son."

"That is more than I have. I only want to be rich and comfortable, and have Myra all to myself."

Mrs. Dallas made a gesture of disgust and contempt.

"What!" she exclaimed, "a creature that treats you with coldness and disdain!"

The young man laughed—not a pleasant laugh.

"That's what gives a sort of zest to it. I should like to have her in spite of all—if it is all real, which I doubt."

"So do I," echoed his mother dreamily; and then silence fell upon them. Mrs. Dallas's thoughts were evidently far away.

Lionel yawned slightly, and rolled himself a cigarette; then he stretched out his hand to take a weekly society paper which lay on the sofa near him. For a minute or two he glanced carelessly at it, and then asked, in his usual gentle tone—

"Isn't this the relative I have heard the colonel talk of?" And he read aloud: "'The late George Dallas, Esq., of Harley Street and Crown Court, E.C., is reported to have died intestate. Had Colonel Dallas survived his relative he would, therefore, have been heir to the elder gentleman's wealth, which is considerable. Unfortunately that gallant and distinguished officer predeceased his uncle by a week.'"

"What!" cried Mrs. Dallas, starting to her feet, her eyes blazing with excitement. "That man dead

without a will, only a week after my husband! and all his wealth consequently lost to *me*—to you! My God! it is too cruel, too bitter a disappointment! Now it all goes to a distant cousin—an overbearing, empty-headed fellow. You must remember his dining here nearly two years ago—Cecil Forrester? What spell of ill-luck is on me?”

She snatched the paper from her son, read the announcement eagerly, then crushing it in her hands flung it from her with vehement despair.

CHAPTER II.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

It was an awful blow. For years the chance of possessing old George Dallas's wealth was the dream of her life: and to miss it by a week! Had Mrs. Dallas known that fate had entered both in the race for death, she would have fought the King of Terrors even more desperately than she did, and she had done her best! For on her husband hung all her plans, all her ambition, though he had not proved the lever she had expected.

When the beautiful, pensive widow of Dan Ashby—a commissariat officer, said to be rather too fond of “sampling” the rum and brandy provided for the division to which he was attached—came to consult Colonel Dallas respecting her husband's affairs, and to ask some small concession for her son, her heart swelled within her as she noticed his increasing

tenderness of manner, his lingering looks, his devotion to her interests.

The daughter of an indigo planter and his native wife, she had been sent to England for her education, and returned to India with a strong determination to marry none but an English officer, thereby, as she thought, securing the first step on the ladder leading up to social distinction. She found, however, that poor Dan Ashby was but a broken reed as regarded her purposes, while his death left her in poor circumstances and social insignificance.

Now Colonel Dallas was a well-known man in India, a distinguished officer, a man of good family, well bred, and not so very much older than herself. Here she had found the right thing at last, and after some judicious angling she landed her prize. They had not been married more than two or three years when Colonel Dallas met with a bad accident out riding, which was followed by a severe illness, and he was invalided home with small chance of ever again going on active service.

Established in London with moderate though comfortable means, Mrs. Dallas soon found that she and her husband were lost in the crowd from which

they had not sufficient fortune to be distinguished. Colonel Dallas's family connections were not numerous, and lived chiefly at their country places. So her restless desire to be accepted in society—fashionable society—remained unsatisfied. She was a persevering woman, however, and kept a fair face. She devoted herself to the care of her husband, and to religion of the High Church order, and was slowly creeping into a circle of aristocratic dowagers and spinsters, when Colonel Dallas died just a week too soon.

She had often heard of her husband's aged relative, and sighed with almost sickening desire for the wealth he could confer by a stroke of his pen! She scarcely dared to hope for any portion of it, for the old gentleman kept all relations at arm's length; and now when that which might have fulfilled her most ardent wishes, his decease intestate, had occurred, unkind Death had stepped in to rob her of the riches she pined for! She had gained an immense ascendancy over her husband by the exercise of strong self-control, and the careful modelling of her conduct on the lines he approved of, so that Colonel Dallas had no hesitation in leaving his brother's daughter and her affairs in his wife's hands.

It was some time before Mrs. Dallas could master her emotion. She paced up and down, clasping and unclasping her hands, murmuring unintelligible syllables to herself, and seemingly forgetful of her son's presence. At length he exclaimed—

“It is no use your tearing yourself in this way, mother; the money is gone—you will never get it back; so try not to think about it. Even if you poisoned this man Forrester, who seems to have got the cash, it would not come to us. We might cultivate the young fellow; but I fancy he is not the sort of man I should get on with! By the way, when do you think of going out of town?”

“I do not know! For the moment I can think of nothing but this awful disappointment! I have still an immense quantity of papers to sort and examine—heaps to destroy. I cannot think of going anywhere.”

“Well, I find I am to have my holiday next week, but of course, if you want me——”

“No, I do not want you in the least! Go, by all means. Where do you think of going?”

“I am not sure. Two of my chums want me to join them in an expedition to Dieppe.”

"Dieppe! You will spend a heap of money. I cannot afford it."

"No, I don't suppose I shall. Brown and Dobbs, the men I think of joining, are very prudent fellows; and I only get a fortnight."

"I suppose you have put by something for this trip?"

"Well, no; I have a miserable salary, as you know; but when old Overton told me I might have from the second to the twentieth of August, he gave me a fi'pun note, and said I had not done badly! These lordly Englishmen are terrible thickheads at arithmetic, and waste their money awfully without having much to show!"

"If I give you five pounds more, will it do?"

"No, my dear mother, certainly not! Make it fifteen. You can do it easily!"

"No, Lionel! I cannot do it easily. I will give you ten, and if you are run aground, a couple more but not unless you are very hard up. I expect you to make the ten do."

"Well, I'll try!" Then, after a pause, he resumed, "So you are going to make Myra an allowance? What put that into your head?"

"Regard for my own reputation! As the girl was

known to be adopted by my husband in a way, I could not send her adrift unprovided for. Now I need not be troubled with her any more; she will marry some writing-master or traveller, and keep out of my way. I never could bear her, she is so hopelessly without tact; you can never tell when she may break into your squares and scatter your reserves—there is a sort of barbarous indifference about her that enrages me! It is hard to hurt her.”

“Yet she is what’s called sensitive!” observed Lionel, rising as he spoke. “You never could understand Myra. I don’t think I can either, but that does not matter much. I think I’ll take a stroll round to the tennis ground.”

“It is scarcely seemly to show yourself in public so soon!”

“Oh! I shan’t play!—not such a fool! but I can sit and smoke and talk to anyone I know, though I don’t suppose I’ll find anyone there—every soul is away.”

“Be sure you are not late for dinner—7.30.”

“All right,” said the youth, and having lit his cigarette he sauntered out of the room.

* * * * *

Meantime, Myra Dallas carried a heavy heart with

her on her not too rapid progress towards her only friend's abode. She was in that stage of existence when a certain amount of worldly knowledge begins to force itself on the understanding, and instinctively the soft hands of inexperienced girlhood grope half-blindly for friendship, for support, and at this period of awakening her one stay was taken from her.

On Uncle Edward she had leaned as on a tower of strength. He had always been kind to her; there was something pitying in his kindness—he always seemed sorry for her.

This produced a depressing effect. It made her feel there was some sad circumstance in her life that entitled her to constant compassion. Her strong sympathy with him enabled her to bear up against the ill-concealed enmity of his wife, and even to assist her in hiding it, for Myra soon felt the difference of Mrs. Dallas's voice and manner before the colonel, and when he was not present. She knew it would vex him to perceive the tacit dislike which Myra felt so keenly, so she kept up a friendly aspect and held her tongue.

That her uncle was vaguely aware his wife and niece did not draw to each other she began to see.

For her last birthday—an anniversary rarely noticed—he had, in his wife's absence, given her a diamond and sapphire ring roughly set in soft gold, with which she was highly pleased, and she immediately showed it to Mrs. Dallas. That lady dropped her darkly fringed eyes and said amiably that the stones were good, that the colonel also was very good, but as the mounting was quite barbaric she would have it properly set if Myra would give it to her; to which Myra replied that she preferred the ring just as it was.

It was a cruel change for her to a London school after having had the run of her father's studio, and the command of his diminutive *ménage*, where their only servant, a kindly old German who adored her and treated her as her own child, was cook and housekeeper; and where the artists, her father's friends, who came to talk and smoke with him, treated her with affectionate politeness, and even deigned to discuss books and music with the frank outspoken child, as she was then. To be suddenly transported to a stiff middle-class school—where her ways were considered lamentably unsettled and untidy, and where her general information, though rather beyond the average, was accounted quite useless

for examination purposes—was indeed a trial. At first the sense of strangeness and isolation was intolerable; she almost fretted herself to death, and was only saved from utter despair by the friendship of the German governess, who quickly developed a *schwärmerei* for her.

Time, however, levels all things. Gradually poor Myra hardened into something like indifference, and found friends among her schoolmates, though she never became a general favourite, nor did she ever take a high place in her class. She had a good idea of historical periods, but she could not remember dates, nor could she produce precise pigeon-holed bits of information, though she had a clear bird's-eye view of many things.

Still the days grew more endurable as time went on; and as her mind matured, occasional vague doubts as to what was to become of her presented themselves. At nineteen, however, the future does not seem terrible; good must lurk behind the golden mist that enwraps it, and the unknown may hold heights of joy, as well as depths of sorrow.

Of late her visits to Melford Road were fewer and farther between. The presence of Lionel Ashby

introduced an element of discomfort, and something indefinable had come between her Uncle Edward and herself. His failing health threw him more and more into his wife's hands, and at length the icy grasp of death 'closed the scene.

* * * * *

The second day after the conversation above recorded was dull and sultry, and evening was drawing in. Ruby Lodge, Vale Terrace, St. John's Wood, Mrs. Fairchild's establishment for young ladies, was in a very desolate condition. The "breaking-up" festivities were over, and the last pupils had departed that morning. Ends of cord, torn paper, morsels of straw, were freely scattered about. Bolsters, pillows, and folded blankets lay in the middle of the deserted beds. The chalk marks were unobliterated on the big black-board in the schoolroom, and Whiteley's men had already removed the drawing-room curtains. Myra had passed a miserable, unemployed day. She had nothing to do and nowhere to go. Mrs. Fairchild, who had been breathlessly busy all the morning, had told her as she was going out that she intended calling on Mrs. Dallas, to ascertain her wishes and intentions.

"I hope she will not want to leave you here, Myra," she said, as she put on her gloves in the hall. "It would be most inconvenient. I want to have a regular clean-up; it was not properly done last year. However, we shall see!" with which vague remark she departed.

The slow hours had dragged through. Myra had arranged the books in the schoolroom, and tried to finish a piece of fancy work left to her by one of the departing pupils, an occupation in which she was no proficient, and which she dropped after a while, to sit musing over her past happy days in the years which seemed so far away back. She vaguely heard the house-bell, and after a considerable time a very dusty housemaid came to inform her that tea was ready.

In Mrs. Fairchild's private room Myra found that lady in a comfortable morning-gown, seated at tea, the table being spread with some more solid comestibles than bread-and-butter.

"Come, Myra, let us have something to eat before we talk. I am thoroughly exhausted, and I must get off to-morrow, for I shall only have a short rest, as there are lots of things to be seen to. You are looking rather dazed; a cup of tea will rouse you."

A period of silence ensued, during which Mrs. Fairchild applied herself vigorously to supply the waste of the last six or seven hours; while Myra, depressed, and anxious to know what was to become of her, pretended to occupy herself with a slice of bread-and-butter.

“Another cup of tea, Myra? Then ring the bell and we will send away the things. I feel greatly refreshed. Such a day as I have had! I was quite two hours in Westbourne Grove, and then I had to go all the way over to Melford Road.”

A pause while the tray was removed and the gas lit: then when the door was finally closed she resumed—

“Well, Myra, I had a long talk with Mrs. Dallas, and I must say a more charming, right-minded woman I have never met! I am afraid you have given her a good deal of trouble! Not that she complained, you know, but one could see it.”

“I never gave her any trouble that I know of,” said Myra dejectedly. “As far as I can make out, my chief fault is being in the world at all. I seem in everybody’s way. Would it oblige Mrs. Dallas if I were to jump into the Serpentine?”

“That is a most unbecoming and irreligious

speech, Myra, and shows how little the precept and example set before you in this house have sunk into your mind. However, I really haven't time to dwell upon these serious topics ! I had a long conversation with your aunt, in which she showed a true interest in you, and explained your circumstances to me. I am therefore willing that you should remain here during the holidays, and fill the place of German teacher until I can find a really suitable person. You can have the small back room on the top floor, and take your meals in the study next the kitchen—I mean the garden. I must leave cook—she is old, but she can be trusted. Jane is leaving, and I take Lizzy with me, and it is perhaps better cook should not be quite alone. Can you mend linen neatly ? It would be rather a nice occupation to look through the linen closet and put it all in order. At any rate, do the best you can ; the rest and quiet will do you good ; and you can write to me every week, and send me the amount of the tradesmen's books, which I trust to your keeping down as much as possible. Now, Myra, I hope you see that I am stretching a point. There is scarcely anyone else in the world would do as much for you ! ”

“Ah, yes; you are right; now that Uncle Edward is gone!”

“Well, I hope you will prove grateful, and help me as much as you can. I am a little uneasy about next quarter; the two Dixons are leaving, and Clara Dillon, and I am not sure little Carry James will return. These are dreadful gaps. I must fill them up somehow! Mrs. Dallas is extremely kind in offering to recommend my school. Not that I want any of her aristocratic friends—those sort of people are more costly than remunerative! No; I shall just stick to the well-to-do middle class.”

Myra gazed at her as though she hardly understood her words. “Yes, you are very good,” she murmured.

“I suppose you have nothing else to propose?” said Mrs. Fairchild sharply.

“Me! No; of course not. I have no one to go to, and—and I will do what you want as well as I can; but my darning is no great things. I used to watch poor dear old Hedwig mending things, but I never did much myself.”

“Then the present is a great opportunity for you to improve yourself. And now, Myra, I shall go to my

room, as I have some writing to do. Get to bed soon, for I shall want you to help me in my packing to-morrow morning, and to take directions; so good-night. I hope that you will study to win Mrs. Dallas's regard. I am afraid you have not been as mindful of her opinion as you ought."

"I am sure I don't know! I never heard her express any opinion."

"Ah, Myra! that is the speech of an unchastened and perverse spirit. There! you had better go to bed, and pray to God to give you a meek spirit and a contrite heart! I wish you would tell cook as you pass the kitchen-stair that I shall breakfast at half-past eight, and I should like a bloater and some buttered toast."

Though Myra was by no means attached to Mrs. Fairchild, she did not dislike her. She was a woman with a cool head, a tranquil temper, and a keen sense of her own interest.

When first Myra was placed with her she had the prestige of being the niece of Colonel Dallas, and a favourite niece into the bargain, so her sins of untidiness and irregularity were tolerated, and gradually diminished. After a while her familiarity with foreign

languages made her of use conversationally, and Mrs. Fairchild grew more friendly, though she began to perceive clearly that Myra was a mere dependent on her uncle's bounty.

It was not, however, till this day that she was aware of the poor girl's sad position. The shrewd little woman (she had a small neat figure, prematurely white hair, and sharp, twinkling, dark brown eyes) had too much sense to be unnecessarily cruel, and she advised Mrs. Dallas to leave Myra in ignorance of the stain upon her birth; for though far from sensitive herself, she felt instinctively what a paralysing effect the knowledge of this misfortune would have upon such a nature.

The possibility of filling up the post of German governess so cheaply charmed Mrs. Fairchild; for Myra was if anything more familiar with German than with English; nor was she a bad teacher, though by no means fond of teaching.

It was with real regret and moist eyes that Myra bid the active little schoolmistress good-bye for five long weeks. They spread out an appalling vista of loneliness before her, for Myra was a sociable soul. After all, Mrs. Fairchild was far better than no one, and

though Myra's early foreign training did not suggest the complete barrier which exists between ladies and servants in England, the cook, who was left in charge of her and of the house, did not suggest companionship.

The last directions were screamed from the departing cab, and Myra turned back to the house sadly enough, with a curious unsettled feeling of being unable to begin anything. Mrs. Fairchild had had an early luncheon or dinner, and a long afternoon awaited her.

"I'm sure, miss, it will be terrible dull for you," said cook, an elderly woman, short and extremely stout, with a masterful nose, and a taste for fine language. "Suppose you just go and take a nice walk while I put the little study straight, and then you'll be inclined to partake of tea when you come in; and don't trouble to begin any needlework till to-morrow. Mrs. Fairchild she 'ave mentioned as you were to look through the 'ouse linen."

"Yes, cook," said Myra dejectedly; "and I am afraid I shall not do it well. I am rather stupid about needlework."

"Don't be down-hearted, miss; there's a good bit

to do, and you will be quite clever at it by the time you get through."

"I hope so, cook; I will take your advice and go out to see a friend who lives some way off, and I may stay to tea with her."

"Very well, miss! only don't stay till hafter dusk. You'll hexcuse me! You see, has you are but a young lady, and being left all to yourself, it is an obligation on you to be very careful; there's as much mischief done through hignorance as through knowledge of evil. I do hope you'll not think me presumptious, miss."

"Indeed I do not, cook," said Myra, smiling through her tears. "I am thankful that anyone cares whether I do right or wrong. I shall come back in daylight!"

It was some time before she could set forth. A flood of tears brought her relief, but made her unfit to be seen till after an elaborate process of bathing her eyes with cold water and fanning them. Then a reaction came, as it does happily to youth. She would go and take some books from the schoolroom library—notably some German books—and a map of London to trace her way to Mrs. Keene's. She

had not seen that valued friend for a long time, as the latter had not been at home on the occasion of her last visit.

Mrs. Keene would counsel her respecting a new frock and hat, to say nothing of a few important extras. At nineteen there is always comfort in a new dress, and our Myra was by no means of that lofty mental tone which would lift her above trifles. She had been so unaccustomed to buy anything for herself that she was nervously alive to the danger of not using her scanty supply of cash to the best advantage. As to her uncle's widow, she would never willingly see her face again! What had she, Myra, done to be treated as an outcast? Well, she would not break her heart about that. She would dress herself and make her way to her good friend Mrs. Keene, who always treated her with respectful kindness, who had known her sweet mother, the mother Myra had never known, but who must have been infinitely lovable, if the picture painted by her father, which was one of her few treasures, at all resembled her. It was a long walk from Vale Terrace to Gilbert Street, Great Portland Street, but open air and motion were invigorating, and when she reached her destination

Myra felt rather less fatigued than when she set out.

Mrs. Keene's interest in the young orphan arose from an incident in bygone times, when she was lady's-maid in a Russian family which occupied a grand suite of apartments at Munich in the same house where Frederic Dallas and his belongings occupied the *quatrième*. The Englishwoman was struck down by illness on the eve of starting with her employers for St. Petersburg. They left her in a garret, giving the *concierge* money to provide her needs. The illness proved to be an infectious fever, and Myra's mother, finding the sufferer was almost deserted, undertook to nurse the poor woman, and by her watchful care pulled her through. This act bound Mrs. Keene to the child of her benefactress. Through many vicissitudes she never lost sight of the artist and his daughter. Not long after her escape from the jaws of death, she married a courier, and was happy enough for some years. Having no children, she started a kind of private temperance hotel, which succeeded beyond her hopes. It was much frequented by quiet, careful customers of various nationalities, among whom were artists, and couriers, and even stray spinsters of severe

respectability, recommended by old employers of the courier. The good woman's connection spread, for all those who were once her inmates were ready to return to her comfortable, well-ordered house.

When Myra reached the door, Mrs. Keene was parleying with a gentleman in the hall—a well-built man above middle height, dressed in an old shooting coat with many pockets. He wore a black silk handkerchief negligently knotted round his throat, and was holding a soft, broad-brimmed, brown felt hat in a sinewy, sunburnt hand. The shirt-cuff from which it issued, however, was snowy white, and the whole bearing of the man was high-bred and refined. He was making some inquiries for an inmate who had left the previous day, when Mrs. Keene, turning from him to seek the address which had been left with her, perceived Myra.

“Oh, dear, miss! I did not expect you would be here to-day,” she said.

The stranger moved aside with a bow to let her pass, but she paused, looked earnestly at him, as if she recognised his straight features, dark eyes, and auburn hair, then her pale, sad face lit up, and holding out her hand, she exclaimed—

“Jack! Jack Leyton! don’t you know me?”

The gentleman thus addressed looked puzzled, but took the hand she offered.

“I am ashamed to say my memory plays me false. I cannot exactly recall you,” he said.

“What! have you *quite* forgotten! and you used to be with my father every day in Munich—you *must* remember Bar Strasse and your friend Dallas!”

“Good God! then you are little Myra!” he exclaimed, letting his hat fall, and laying his other hand over hers for an instant. “This is an extraordinary *rencontre*.”

“Pray walk into my room, miss, if you would like to speak to the gentleman,” said Mrs. Keene politely, as she opened the door of a small, neatly furnished room at the back, with a ground-glass window.

“Oh yes, do come in! I am so very, very glad to see you!” cried Myra. The man she called Leyton followed her and closed the door.

“Now I look at you, your face and your blue eyes come back to me! I am ashamed of myself for not remembering you at once,” he said. “I heard that you had lost your father, and I was awfully sorry for you. Then someone said your uncle, Colonel Dallas,

had adopted you. That was when I was away in Egypt. I trust," looking at her with a keen, swift glance, "you are well and happy."

"I am quite well," she said, and he noticed that her lips trembled. "But Uncle Edward is dead, too."

"Ah!" said her new old friend; and he paused. "Where are you staying?"

"I am still at school," she returned, with a sad little smile.

"At school! Why, you are quite grown up, and a good deal taller than I should have expected; you used to be quite a little thing—I am almost sorry you are not so still. I like little girls ever so much better than young ladies!" he added, rather grimly.

"Oh, Jack! but you *must* like me!" cried Myra, her blue eyes all but brimming over, "for my dear father's sake; and I have no one in the world to like me now."

Leyton looked very steadily, almost sternly, at her, and then his face softened as he murmured to himself, "Poor child!" Then added—

"I suppose I may come and see you at this school of yours?"

“ Yes, certainly ! ”

“ Where is it ? for I must leave you now. I have to keep an appointment.”

Myra told him. He wrote the address in his pocket-book.

“ You will be sure to come, Jack ? ” she said imploringly.

“ Certain ! but not to-morrow or next day.”

“ On Saturday then ? ”

“ Yes, if I possibly can, and we will have a long talk ! If I can help you, Myra, I will, for your father’s sake. Good-bye for the present.”

CHAPTER III.

TAKING POSSESSION.

ABOUT the same time that poor Myra was gladdened by the phantom of past happy days, a young man of perhaps seven- or eight-and-twenty was driving a well-appointed dog-cart along the leafy lanes of a district not far distant from the mighty city, yet thoroughly rural and retired.

Two hours from King's Cross takes the traveller to the park-like scenery which surrounds the old country town of Redworth in Blandfordshire, where for miles he can drive through one fertile well-cared-for domain after another, till the impression of a whole country-side of pleasure-ground becomes stamped upon his imagination. The young man was slight, well-dressed, and soldierly-looking, with clear, cold grey eyes and neat sandy moustache. He handled the ribbons with a practised hand, and seemed

on the friendliest terms with the large, powerful chestnut mare in the shafts.

"I did not know it was so late," he said, turning his head to speak to the natty groom who sat behind, and who appeared to have been melted and run into a mould, so perfectly did his clothes, boots, and hat fit him.

"Yes, sir! There's the 5.25 down train," and the man pointed to a distant line of white smoke as they crossed a steep bridge over the railway.

"Amazon must step out, then," returned his master, touching his steed lightly on the flank; and they rattled on at a swinging pace, that soon brought them to the station, which was almost half a mile on the near side of Redworth.

They were just in time to see the passengers descend from the London train, while the porters bustled about with their trucks full of luggage, and great bundles of evening papers were being thrown on to the platform.

Among the arrivals was a tall, slight, elderly man, with dark grizzled hair and whiskers, a nose that the irreverent might describe as snub, and a pair of twinkling eyes, nondescript in colour, but somewhat

too light for his complexion. He was slightly bent, yet moved alertly, and though his garments looked of the rough-and-ready order he seemed thoroughly a gentleman.

On passing by the ticket-collector he looked sharply round as if in search of someone, and then perceiving the dog-cart he waved his hand, and called in a loud tone, quite regardless of who might hear—

“Holloa, Cis!”

“All right!” returned the young man before described, “here you are!”

The new-comer walked quickly to him, and they shook hands cordially as they exchanged greetings.

“Dobbs,” said the driver of the dog-cart to his groom, “go hurry them up with Mr. Wardlaw’s luggage.”

“Don’t trouble; here it comes,” said Wardlaw, as a porter was seen approaching with a portmanteau on his shoulder and a gun-case in his hand.

“Jump up, then!” cried the younger man. “Dobbs will look after your traps. I never was so glad of anything as I was to find you had come back from Holland, for I have a hundred and one things to consult you about.”

“Well! my poor wits are at your service! By George! Cis, my boy, a change has come o’er the spirit of your dream, and no mistake. No more need to sell the old place or exchange into the Line.”

“No, nor to stay in the service if I do not like it.”

“No! you are as free as air! Gad, the country is looking beautiful, and the crops are in first-rate condition. Have you much wheat laid down this year?”

“I hardly know. I haven’t been here more than three or four days, and there has been a heap to look after.”

So, talking on a variety of matters, but always with reference to some great change, which was to be discussed more fully afterwards, they drove swiftly along the embowered lanes, across angles of open gorse-grown common, through bits of woodland, and up short sudden hills, from the tops of which wide views over a rich, fair country were to be had.

At length the entrance to a park appeared, wrought-iron gates, and a pretty ivy-covered lodge. The chestnut mare pricked up her ears and quickened

her pace, and a few minutes more of a winding avenue brought them to a solemn-looking red-brick mansion with stone copings and a steep roof of Queen Anne's period.

A clump of fine old lime-trees sheltered it on the east, while on the south-west the ground fell away in a sudden descent which had been turned into a terraced garden, from which was a grand look-out over wood and plain. A double flight of broad stone steps met in a low arch, from which a third led to the entrance, whence issued a superior-looking servant out of livery, followed by another who apparently was a groom, as the master drew up at the door.

"Welcome to Wickham Hall, my dear Wardlaw!" he exclaimed, throwing the reins to one of the men. "It must be ten years since you were here!"

"Not quite! but nearly nine, I imagine! It was the year before you left Sandhurst, and not long after your father died," replied Wardlaw, looking round. "Well, Cis, I am glad the old home is not to pass away from you;" and he followed his young host across the hall, which was lofty and spacious, with a parquetry floor, to a handsome dining-room (over-

looking the terrace and the wide view beyond), where tea was set out.

The furniture, the hangings, the carpets all looked faded, worn, and neglected ; the melancholy traces of "Decay's effacing fingers" were perceptible everywhere. The time before dinner was amply occupied by an examination of the stables, out-houses, dairy, and the etceteras of a high-class country gentleman's residence. At that meal many projects of repairs and improvements were discussed while the servants were in the room, but as soon as the friends were left to their wine and olives, and the door closed, there was a pause, and, having filled his glass, Wardlaw resumed in a different tone—

"This is a wonderful turn of fortune for you, Cis !"

"It is," returned Cecil Forrester, the owner of the mansion and domain. "I never had the faintest hope that I should have come in for the money old George Dallas had scraped together. He and my father were second cousins, but had not much love for each other—I don't think I ever saw him but once in my life."

"When did he die ?"

"Barely a month ago. It seems he had made endless wills, bequeathing his property to all kinds of people and institutions. His solicitor told mine that he tore up his last not more than a week before his death, and was planning another more preposterous than before, when death stepped in and—saved me."

"He had nephews. Are both dead?"

"Yes, of course, or I should be nowhere! The eldest, Colonel Edward Dallas, died only a week before his uncle. He had married a widow out in India—a deuced handsome woman, with a dash of the tar-brush, I fancy. I have met her at Lady Maria Vernon's ghastly parties. She is a fairly well-bred woman. He had no children. Then the younger, Frederic, was a bit of a black sheep—went to smash early; went off with another man's wife, I believe—an idiotic thing to do. He lived and died abroad; I don't know if he left any children or not—of course they would not count if he did."

"I knew Frederic Dallas once," said Wardlaw, with a far-away look in his shrewd eyes. "He was always an unlucky dog, but he was a good fellow, a thorough gentleman, and a true artist, though not a successful one; and I happen to know how he drifted,

as he did into most things, into his connection with the poor woman you mentioned. She was English, of a good but decayed family, I fancy; she was married to an Italian, an awful brute, well off, but cruel and thoroughly bad. He soon tired of her, and led her the devil's own life. She fled from him, and took refuge with Fred Dallas, the only Englishman within reach. She was poor and friendless, and sought safety rather than love. She was a sweet creature when I saw her—quite twenty years ago. The husband made no attempt to pursue or punish her, and so she lived on with Dallas. There could be but one ending to such an affair. I fancy he was fond of her; their home seemed happy and well ordered enough, but there was always an underlying minor chord of sadness in her look and in her voice. I have quite lost sight of them. I fancy both are dead; at any rate, I hope *she* did not survive him; at that time they had no children."

"So much the better! It is amazing what fools people make of themselves," said Forrester, picking himself out a fat olive. Wardlaw cast a curious look at him.

"Your head was always a trifle older than your

shoulders, Cis," he said ; " though I am grateful to think you never gave me much trouble while you were my ward ! Pray, were you never guilty of any follies yourself ? "

" Never of a lasting one ! " returned the young man coolly. " Still, do what I would in the way of prudence, I could not have stayed in the Hussars after we left India if these obliging kinsmen had not died off so opportunely. Frederic Dallas departed this life nearly four years ago, but of his companion I know nothing."

There was a brief pause ; then Wardlaw, rousing himself with a sigh, asked—

" Do you intend to remain in the army ? "

" Yes, for a year or two ; I should rather like to tack ' colonel ' to my name ; but a year or two won't do that—I am not an enthusiastic soldier. I shall prefer developing this old place. There is room for improvement, but my father left it so loaded with debt that I have never had a shilling to lay out on it."

" Well, you will very probably marry money now."

" I should not object ; but not for a good many years to come. I don't at all fancy matrimony."

Having a woman at home in authority, to whom one must always be civil, is a horrible idea !”

“ Many men don’t recognise the obligation !”

“ Ah, well ! I should like to present a decent appearance to society.”

“ You are a flinty-hearted young fellow. Are you so unnatural a monster as not to take pleasure in the society of women ?” added Wardlaw, with a good-humoured laugh.

“ Oh ! pleasure enough ! but one can’t live on sweets all one’s life ; such things are about good enough for second course. Now let us go into figures a little, and see what it might cost to repair the stables and repaint the house !”

“ Very well ! By the way, what a blow it must have been to the widow, this death of Edward Dallas just before his uncle ! Had he lived even twenty-four hours longer than the old man, what a grand ‘ third ’ would have fallen to her share !”

“ I don’t suppose she had any idea of such a chance, nor her husband either. George Dallas had not spoken to his nephews for years, and I suspect if anything could have kept him alive it would be the desire to cut off his kindred from his wealth.

However, let us hope he knows better now!" concluded Forrester, with a well-satisfied laugh.

The conversation then turned on the improvements he contemplated, and the evening passed swiftly in discussing such an interesting topic.

"What leave have you, Cis?" asked his guest, as they were parting for the night.

"A couple of months. Not too much for all I have to do!"

"No. I dare say not. You might write to those builders to come down at once and make their estimates. I should like to know what they will suggest about a billiard-room, which is an absolute necessity. I am due in Yorkshire, at Carrington's, on the 10th. He has asked a small party of real sportsmen for the 12th—no women! and he says the birds are abundant," said Wardlaw.

"I shall try what I can find here. I'm afraid the game has been awfully neglected. But I'll take care of it in future." They then said good-night.

Cecil Forrester was a very modern young man, with a keen sense of comfort, and no particular enthusiasm about anything. Yet he was not unpopular in his regiment, for he was very straight in

all his dealings, and the cool steadiness with which he avoided extravagance and debt—openly declaring his reasons—earned him a certain degree of respect. He attended sufficiently to his duties, but often wished he had been put into some profession in which he could have made money, which in his eyes was all-important. He had been an only son, and adored by his father, who would have done anything for him except to restrain his habitual lavishness. He and his sister, who was several years his senior, had been left to the guardianship of Wardlaw. She married early, and had been some years dead, so there was no one to share Cecil's unexpected fortune.

No father could have made a better choice of a guide and protector for his son than the late squire of Wickham Hall did. Richard Wardlaw was a man of society, well known and well liked. He had been at school with the elder Forrester, and had been called to the bar. His early friends prophesied great things of him, and at first he worked hard. Then he had a severe illness, a nervous fever, after which he was ordered abroad for rest and change, and for years he was unseen. Suddenly he reappeared. Sundry contributions from his pen to the high-class periodicals

and literary weeklies, descriptions of out-of-the-way corners he had visited, and strange races he had studied, recalled him to the cognisance of his former acquaintances, and he was cordially welcomed. Then he ceased to write, at least apparently. He established himself in a comfortable flat in the south-west district, and lived moderately, but like a gentleman, no one knew exactly how; for Forrester and other old intimates were well aware that he was a younger son of an impoverished county family. Now, he kept a grave German servant, and a good stout hack, went out a great deal to dinners, and belonged to a well-known club. He was looked upon as a shrewd man of the world, whose opinions were always heard with attention. He had been a careful guardian, and perhaps was the only person towards whom young Forrester felt any affection.

In truth, Wardlaw, who was a bit of a philosopher, was rather curious to see what effect the sudden accession of wealth would have upon his ex-ward, after the restrictions of his early days; and it gratified him to see that even in the first flush of emancipation he was by no means carried away by the sense of power money gives.

His visit to Wickham interested and amused him ; he had a good many tastes, and building was one of them. To animals he was devoted, and it gave him more satisfaction to provide for the comfort of horses than for that of his fellow-men.

In the meantime Mrs. Edward Dallas found the grief, great or small, caused by her husband's death swallowed up in her passionate indignation at the crass combination of circumstances which robbed her of a share in the wealth which ought to have been her husband's. Circumstances had indeed been cruel to her. However, her only line of conduct was to keep up an air of gentle resignation and excite as much interest in the minds of her acquaintances as possible.

At present no one was in town to be impressed, so she devoted herself to the regulation of her affairs and the careful and methodical examination of her husband's papers, from which she selected the few she thought it prudent to keep. These papers included many belonging to Frederic Dallas, among them some letters and memoranda relating to the unhappy mother of Myra, over which Mrs. Dallas sneered contemptuously.

That a woman should allow herself to drift into ruin because a man treated her badly seemed to her pitifully weak. She had only to keep her love affairs clear of her business matters, and to manipulate her wrongs skilfully and picturesquely, in order to convert them into a ladder whereby she might climb to a safer position.

Her days, then, were well spent and agreeably varied by consultations with Mr. Deedes—plans for the future, and estimates of the expenditure to which she intended to limit herself.

“When you have put away those things, Mrs. Dwyer,” she said one afternoon, as the woman to whom the house belonged was removing her luncheon-tray, “I wish you would come back; I wish to speak to you.”

“Certainly, ’m,” said Mrs. Dwyer deferentially.

Mrs. Dwyer had been housekeeper in a gentleman’s family for many years, and had invested her savings in the furniture of a neat house in Melford Road. When it was completed, Mrs. Dallas, looking out for temporary quarters on her arrival from India nearly four years ago, was struck with the idea that it would be well to hire the owner as well as the

tenement. It would be an immense saving of trouble, which the handsome widow hated, and possibly of expense. She therefore struck a bargain with the experienced Mrs. Dwyer, who undertook to provide servants for a fixed sum; and an excellent arrangement it proved for both parties.

Now it was somewhat doubtful whether the agreement would terminate or not. The landlady was just a little anxious. Not that she liked Mrs. Dallas. There was something overbearing about her lodger, something that half-irritated, half-cowed her; but it had been what she termed "a good let." She had paid off her furniture and even invested a little money, so she hoped nothing would occur to disturb their relations.

"Well," said that lady, when Mrs. Dwyer re-entered the room, as she laid down the paper she had been reading, and settled herself more comfortably among the sofa-cushions, while she looked searchingly at her landlady through her half-closed lids, "I have a good deal to say to you, Mrs. Dwyer—you had better sit down."

This was unusual condescension. "She wants me to lower my rent!" thought Mrs. Dwyer, a tall, thin

woman, with light-reddish hair, rapidly becoming grey, worn in flat braids secured by a narrow band of black velvet, and surmounted by a bonnet-like cap of good white lace. She had somewhat faded, suspicious, wondering eyes, and long bony hands—rather restless hands, given to playing with whatever was within reach while she talked. She was, as was her wont, neatly dressed in black.

“Thank you, ’m,” said Mrs. Dwyer, taking a chair.

“I have been very uncertain as to my plans,” resumed Mrs. Dallas, “but I have now made up my mind. How long have we been in your house, Mrs. Dwyer?”

“It will be four years the 7th of October since you signed the agreement, ma’am.”

“And we have not been bad tenants?”

“No, ma’am, not by no manner of means.”

“Then you will not be displeased to find that I have decided to remain here, if you will agree to my terms. Of course I cannot afford to give the rent we used.”

“No, ma’am?” interrogatively.

“No! but then I do not want all your house.”

“I’m sorry for that, ma’am; of course a double set

of lodgers makes a difference. That's why I let to you and the poor dear colonel so cheap!"

"Cheap, do you call it?" cried Mrs. Dallas.

"Well, it ain't dear?"

"N—no, not exactly, Mrs. Dwyer; but, dear or cheap, I cannot afford to pay the same rent now, so I propose to keep the dining-rooms and this floor. Then the two rooms above might let advantageously to a single gentleman, and you could make more of your house, although you let me part of it for thirty pounds less than I pay at present!"

"Thirty pounds less! that *is* a come-down, ma'am. I don't think I could give in to that."

An animated discussion followed, which ended in a slight surrender on both sides, and some conversation on minor points followed.

"I should think single gentlemen must be by far the most desirable lodgers," reiterated Mrs. Dallas, with a view to reconciling Mrs. Dwyer to the change she suggested.

"Well, I am not so sure, ma'am; you see, they are apt to shift about; a man that is tied matrimonially is more fixed like."

"I am not so sure, Mrs. Dwyer! There is that

gentleman at your friend's—at No. 24, I mean. Why, he has been five or six years there."

"I know, ma'am—at Mrs. Sims's. She is no friend of mine; I don't hold with her conduct to that poor gentleman. It is now three weeks since I've seen him go by in the morning, and he used to be as regular as clockwork. The girl there—Mrs. Sims's servant—is friendly with my Hannah, and she was telling us the other evening that he is as rich as a Jew, but rather near, and grumbles over his weekly bills. Now, more than a fortnight ago he was took rather unwell, and Mrs. Sims doctored him a bit—she was a nurse in a hospital, and they know a lot too much. Well, since that he has been queer and dazed-like, and shaky on his legs, and I can't help thinking it's terribly like a tale I read in the *London Messenger*, where there was the awfulest bad woman I ever heard of. She gives a dose of particular poison to a poor gentleman, that makes him lose the use of his legs and the power of speech, and gets his keys and his money and the jewels he intended for his granddaughter, who was stolen away by a dreadful villain, the husband—or, any way, he *ought* to have been her husband—of the bad woman!"

“ But, Mrs. Dwyer,” rather contemptuously, “ what has all this to do with a respectable householder in Melford Road ? ”

“ Well, ma’am, I may be an ignorant woman, but it seems to me that Mrs. Sims is tampering with that poor, defenceless man ! Mark my words, ma’am, many a cruel wrong is done under the mask of respectability. Why, down there at No. 17, just before you come, there was a young lady and her brother living ; they rented the house, and it was full of beautiful furniture, all their own. Well, one day I heard the awfulest screams, so I ran to see, and there was two of the biggest ruffians, as far as looks went, and her own brother forcing her into a carriage, and she declaring she wasn’t mad, and begging for mercy. She was as sensible as you or me, ma’am.”

“ Probably more sensible, if you believe such rubbish,” said Mrs. Dallas.

“ Any way, ma’am, the doctor who signed the order, or whatever you call it, for her to be took off shot himself, I was told ; and the brother, who wanted to force her to marry some fellow-scamp of his own, went into an asylum,” concluded Mrs. Dwyer in an indignant tone.

“ Ah ! evidently there was insanity in the family ! ”

“ Maybe so, ma’am, but some people would not be convinced though one rose from the dead. I have seen queer things in my time, but of course I haven’t the power of expressing myself as I could wish ; but it’s no matter ! I’ll just make a fresh agreement, Mrs. Dallas ; and if you’ll sign it, why, we can see about changing the furniture, ma’am.”

“ Very well,” said Mrs. Dallas ; and her landlady departed with wrath in her heart.

“ Thinks she knows better than anyone else,” she muttered to herself. “ I’m not sure she isn’t up to a murder or two herself ! I’ve seen the devil’s own look in those big black eyes of hers. God only knows what she did with the poor colonel. He went off all of a sudden at the last.”

So building up a romance to herself, she went to inspect the washing-up of the luncheon things, and to prepare Mrs. Dallas’s small but dainty dinner.

Though the worthy landlady had taken brevet rank, she was a spinster, of Irish parentage, born and brought up in London—a curious mixture of credulity and scepticism—a voracious appetite for the

wildest romance, and the hardest common-sense in everyday matters. She loved scraping money together, yet was capable of generosity to the very few she loved—a topsy-turvy nature in which the Celtic element predominated, and, above all, a shrewd, clever woman, whom education and training might have developed into something above the common.

CHAPTER IV.

A VISITOR.

THE anticipated joy of talking about her beloved past to one who had shared it, who had known her father and all her surroundings, respecting which she had not found a congenial listener for more than three dreary years, was like a draught of some invigorating elixir to Myra Dallas. In the fulness of her heart, she told cook that she had met an old friend of her father's, and that he was coming to see her.

Cook pictured an elderly, portly, grey-haired gentleman, who might be a useful friend to the solitary young creature of whom she had been left in charge.

The idea of Leyton's visit inspired Myra with new energy. She brought down piles of house-linen and darned diligently under the cook's directions; only in the evening she gave herself the indulgence of a book.

The pianos were all locked and covered with huge

dusting sheets, so she was cut off from a favourite amusement—*i.e.*, wandering from one musical memory to another, occasionally improvising in waltz time, or in more sad and solemn measure.

Three or four days passed, and no Leyton presented himself. Myra's hopes began to falter ; perhaps, like everyone else, he had gone away out of town ? At last, on a fine afternoon, she heard cook's voice in the garden, which communicated with the front of the house by a passage at the side.

"If you'll step this way, sir," it said ; "Miss Dallas is in the study."

The next moment Mr. Leyton stepped through the door-window, and looked quickly round as he shook hands with the daughter of his old friend.

It was a bare, shabby room. A large table covered with much-rubbed and scratched leather, deal shelves crowded with shabby school-books, an empty grate unconcealed by any ornament, a square of much-worn carpet under the table, surrounded by a broad border of linoleum, a few coloured prints from the illustrated papers on the wall, a range of much-bespattered ink-bottles on the mantelshelf, and several cane chairs in various stages of dilapidation, comprised the furniture

and decorations. Myra was as unadorned as her abode. Her old black frock, rubbed shiny in places, was slightly relieved by a large, white, German-looking apron; her hair was brushed back, rising in a sort of *Impératrice* style from its own thickness, and roughly coiled round a very common comb, leaving her wide but somewhat low forehead and quiet pathetic face quite unshaded.

"So, Myra—I may call you Myra, I suppose, though you *are* grown up—you are left alone evidently," said Leyton, when they had exchanged greetings.

"Yes!" resuming her seat on the ottoman—really a box to contain odds and ends—having given her visitor the only comfortable chair, a basketwork lounge; "you see, this is a school. I have lived here ever since—since I left Munich."

"It is time you left school now, Myra!"

"I think so too; but I have nowhere else to go."

There was a slightly embarrassed pause. Leyton bethought him of certain rumours that his friend Dallas had never been married to the lady who passed as his wife, and gazed compassionately at the fair,

slight young creature whose earnest blue eyes looked so innocently into his.

"No! I think I remember you had no near relations," he said at length.

"The only relation I ever heard of or knew of was my Uncle Edward—Colonel Dallas. He was *very* good to me, and I could have loved him very much, but he is dead too," she ended, her voice falling into a sad cadence.

Leyton saw that her blue eyes were full of tears.

"I think I met Colonel Dallas in India before I knew your father," he said.

"What! were you in India, Jack?" she said, wonderingly.

"Yes, ages ago. But didn't your uncle marry? Can't you go and live with his widow?"

Myra shook her head. "She does not want me—she does not like me. She told me not to call her aunt any more! And *I* do not like her! I have a curious sort of fear of her!"

"Ah! I suppose she is a stern, severe old dame?"

"Oh no! she is almost young, and *very* handsome, and she has been generous—that is, she is going to give me money every quarter."

“Indeed! then you ought to get out of this wretched place.”

“It is not wretched, Jack! It is rather grand up-stairs. There are blue damask curtains and lace ones, and thick carpets in the drawing-room, and ornaments, and everything is kept desperately clean. But, oh! everything *is* ugly! I suppose you could not come through the hall, because the men are there with their ladders whitewashing.”

“But, my dear child, it is an awfully dreary place for you. I suppose your friends are all out of town?”

“I don’t think I have any friends,” said Myra quietly, thoughtfully. “Oh, Jack, it was more dreadful than I can tell you, coming away from everything I had ever known to this cold, strange place! I wanted to die! but Death only comes when he is not wanted! Then it was some comfort to speak to my uncle; but Mrs. Dallas rarely left us alone together. Then I got used to things. Some of the girls are kind; I think they are fond of me. Mrs. Fairchild—she is the head of the school—is not bad; she is not disagreeable. Now I am to teach German, and so I shall have work—not that I am particularly fond of work—

but I shall not be able to think so much. It does seem funny to be so different from other girls; they have uncles, and aunts, and cousins, and heaps of relations, even when they *are* orphans! I don't seem to have any at all! But I will not think of the present when I can talk of the old days to you, Jack. You are the only creature I have seen for nearly four long years that knows anything about me!"

"Poor child!" said Leyton, his quick impatient brown eyes growing tenderly compassionate as he gazed upon her. He was by no means soft-hearted; indeed, he had been hardened by some bitter experiences, some rough passages in his career; but at that moment he could have taken this delicate-looking, lonely child in his arms, and soothed her as a father might.

"I wish I *were* a child," said Myra with a sigh. "I wish I could stay a child; but I am nineteen—rather more than nineteen. My birthday is in June."

"You do not look nineteen," said Leyton.

"It is rather curious," returned Myra, looking thoughtfully at him, "that *you* look much younger to me than you did. I used to think you as old as my dear father; now you seem years younger."

"Your father was comparatively a young man when I knew him."

"And how sweet and good he was!" she continued. "My idea of heaven is sitting on his knee and leaning my head against him, while he told me fairy tales—such lovely tales! Then suddenly everything came to an end. It was a terribly hot season, and so much fever."

She proceeded to recount a few particulars of her father's illness and death, the coming of her uncle, the terrible plunge into the coldness and darkness of her present position—all without tears—with uncomplaining, hopeless resignation.

Then the conversation turned on the details of their old happy life in her father's studio, which Leyton had shared for a time; of their expeditions to the park of Nymphenburg, their evenings in the Thiergarten, where they enjoyed the open-air concerts, and the homeward stroll back in the soft warm summer nights, to the supper provided by old Hedwig.

"Do you remember, Jack, I used to sew the buttons on your gloves when you were going out?"

"Did you, Myra? Well, I need not trouble you now. I generally dispense with such superfluities."

“Do you?” said Myra, opening her eyes; “and you used to wear such beautiful gloves.”

“I have left all that sort of finery far behind!” said Leyton, with a harsh laugh.

“I suppose you have grown a great painter?” said Myra with awe.

“Indeed I have not, Myra,” he returned. “I have done nothing great. But I do paint. I have been away in Egypt for nearly two years, doing sketches for one of the illustrated papers, and letter-press too; now I am using up some of the material I accumulated, and have just finished a couple of pictures.”

“Then you have a studio! Oh, Jack! dear Jack! do let me come and see it!” cried Myra, clasping her hands; “*do!*”

“Yes! of course you can! When will you come?”

“Whenever it suits you.”

“I am going out of town from next Saturday to Wednesday. Come on Thursday.”

“Oh! thank you! How delightful it will be to smell the paint, to see the colours, the half-finished things, the bits of drapery and armour!”

“My studio is rather bare as yet,” said Leyton,

smiling, "but you are very welcome to inspect it, and you can bring anyone you like—Mrs. Keene, for instance."

"Oh! thank you, dear Jack!"

"Don't you draw yourself, Myra? I fancy you used to do something in that line?"

"Yes, I can draw a little, and I am very fond of it; but since I came here I could do nothing. They think I work so roughly and coarsely. I cannot please the master. How I wish *you* would teach me, Jack!"

"Teach you!" repeated Leyton, a rather grim smile curling his lips. "I am afraid we could not manage *that*."

"Ah, yes; it is unreasonable of me to ask it," cried Myra, blushing vividly as if ashamed of her own presumption.

Leyton looked at her steadily as he thought—"That girl will charm some fellow out of his reason some day, and so much the worse for her."

"Tell me," he asked purposely to turn the subject, "did your poor father leave nothing behind him?—nothing in the way of property for you? He certainly had an independence?"

"Oh! *I* cannot tell! Mrs. Dallas, my uncle's wife, said I had nothing in the world, but that out of charity she would give me five pounds a quarter."

"The devil she did!" cried Jack Leyton. "She must be a kind-hearted woman, or——" He paused.

"Yes!" returned Myra thoughtfully, "that is what I think; only the 'or' is very big."

Leyton looked at her in some surprise. Had this gentle, innocent-looking girl any conception of the world's wiles and wickedness?

"Jack," said Myra softly, after a pause, "did you ever know my mother?"

"No," he returned. "She was dead some years before I fell in with your father."

"It is so curious that *no* one seems to have known her or her people—not a soul! I have her picture. It is the only thing I brought away with me from Munich!"

"I remember seeing the portrait."

"Ah! that was a large one! My father made quite a small copy for me; I will fetch it." And she left the room.

Leyton stood with his shoulder against the window-frame, his eyes gazing far away, and his face very grave.

"The sins of the fathers are indeed visited on the children," he thought. "There is a hard life before that poor child! Even if I had it in my power, I could scarcely venture to help her. I can scarcely help myself! What a weak, hot-headed fool I have been! I wonder what has become of the poor father's bit of property? I must try and see the widow of Colonel Dallas; not formally, though, or I should never find out anything; and I have nearly dropped out of society."

"Here it is," said Myra, re-entering with a small square parcel in her hand, which she proceeded to unfold. "Look! Is it not a sweet face?" she said, holding out the miniature.

Leyton took it silently. It was both sweet and sad—very sad.

"It is like you," he remarked at last, "especially about the eyes, though yours are darker."

"How sad she looks!" continued Myra, thoughtfully; "yet my father loved her dearly! How can anyone who is fondly loved be unhappy?"

"Many things are needed for happiness," returned Leyton vaguely.

"I do not think so, Jack!" Then she paused, looked earnestly at the picture, and kissed it softly before she wrapped it up again.

Leyton was more touched than he cared to acknowledge even to himself. After a moment's silence, he tried to turn his own and her thoughts from the cruel memory of her mother, the full cruelty of which he prayed she might never know.

"I think I have a sketch of your father among my goods and chattels—rather a daub, I am afraid, for I was but a beginner in those days. I will look for it. If it is not too large, you shall have it."

"Thank you! oh, thank you! I shall prize it dearly."

Then Leyton drew her into talk about herself—her position, her companions, her hopes.

It was a dreary picture she unconsciously drew and he wondered at the calmness with which she gave the details he asked for.

"How can she face such a life?" he thought. "Is it courage, or is it the deadness of indifference? Only the vitality of youth can uphold her!"

At length he rose to end the interview he found so deeply, yet painfully, interesting.

"I must give you directions how to reach my studio, Myra," he said; "by the way, I ought to treat you more respectfully, and call you Miss Dallas."

"Why? No! pray do not. If you do I must call you *Mr.* Leyton, and that seems to put you so far away."

"Oh! ladies may do and say what they like. What is condescension in you is a liberty in me!"

"Fancy *me* condescending to you!" cried Myra, laughing a youthful, joyous laugh, which delighted Leyton.

"There is some life left in her, thank God," he thought, as he smiled back sympathetically.

"I am by no means the potent, grave, and reverend signior you imagine," he said. "I am quite a Bohemian, Myra, and, indeed, a bit of a failure. However, you will come to see me, will you not? My studio, which I share with a chum of mine, is at Shelden House, Shelden Gardens, near Swiss Cottage. It is an old-fashioned place, with a side entrance; in fact, we have rigged up the stables at the back—they don't

make a bad studio—and I live very near; you might get an omnibus from——”

“I can walk quite well,” said Myra. “I know Swiss Cottage; we often walk up there.”

“You seem too slender and willowy to be much of a walker, Myra,” looking scrutinisingly at her. “You are a good deal taller than I expected you would be—you were such a childish little creature when I knew you.”

“But then I was only thirteen or fourteen. Oh! I have grown a hundred years older, and learned so much—so much since!”

“I daresay you have! What do you do with yourself all alone here?”

“I have needlework to do, and a few books, but I have read them all; and the pianos are locked up.”

“I must send you some books! You go and see that hotel woman sometimes? She seems an honest, sensible creature.”

“Yes, I love her; she is so good to me! Do send me some books, dear Jack.”

“Very well. There is my address; don’t lose it.”

“You may be sure I will not! And, Jack, though I *am* grown-up, you *will* like me?”

"I will try," said Leyton, with kindly good-humour.

She came out with him to the gate, and waved him good-bye as he turned and raised his hat to her.

Then she went back to her work, singing over it in the gladness of her heart, for she had found a living link with the golden past, a voice which fell upon her ear as an echo from the only home she had ever known—a friend, a father; well, no, not exactly a father! Jack had grown so much younger than her memory had represented, that she must be content to look on him as an elder brother; and come what might, in five or six days she should see him again, and wander round his studio and be at home once more.

On his part, Jack Leyton walked with a quick firm step down the long straight road in which Ruby Lodge was situated, towards Maida Vale. He had been more moved by this interview than he would have cared to acknowledge.

"Poor young thing!" he murmured to himself. "Yet not a child! There is character in her brow, and thought in her eyes. She is absolutely without knowledge of the world. What a charm! yet how

cruel to let a girl go down into the battle so utterly defenceless ! I can be of little or no use to her. I wish she had a wise woman friend ! I have dropped all mine—the only one who has looked me up since I came back is Lady Shirland, and I am rather afraid of her schemes ! I'll go and see if she is in town. To think of little, loving Myra having grown up into this pale, pliant, lily-like creature ! Her head and throat would exactly suit that picture I want to do ; and what eyes ! There's an unexplored world in them. But I shall not be the explorer. No ; I have had enough of that sort of thing, and I shall be all the more interested if I do not know quite everything that lurks under that fair seeming. Have I not known eyes as holy behind which lurked seven devils at least ? Poor little Myra ! It is hard on a girl to be left as she has been."

CHAPTER V.

TEA IN A STUDIO.

A FEW days after this delightful visit, Myra gave herself another treat.

It had been a damp, drizzling day, which somewhat quenched the brightness that had pervaded her spirits since she had talked with Leyton; but towards evening the clouds broke, and the sun looked out to say good-night to this side of the world.

"I will go and see Mrs. Keene," she said to cook, who had come in to ask if she would mind doing with an egg for her supper, "so I shall not want any supper."

"That's a good bit off, miss, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is in Gilbert Street, Great Portland Street."

"Dear me, miss! I wonder if I might trouble you

to leave my spectacles at Mudge's, in Edgware Road. One of the glasses is loose, and I am that dependent on them I——”

“Oh, I will take them with pleasure, cook. I can walk down there and take the train from Edgware Road.”

“I am afraid, miss, I am taking too great a liberty.”

“Not at all! I shall go at once, and come back before dark.”

The cook thanked her in choice language, and Myra hastened to put on hat and cloak, and started her expedition.

On getting into a carriage at Edgware Road her eye was caught by a familiar face, a face that smiled grimly at her.

“Ah! Mrs. Dwyer! how do you do?” said Myra, with her usual frank kindliness, glad to recognise anyone. “Are you quite well?”

“Pretty middling, Miss Dallas, thank you. I hope you are well. If I may take the liberty of saying so, you are looking a deal better than when I seen you last. You have not been nigh us for a long time, miss.”

"I have been very busy," said Myra. "I suppose Mrs. Dallas is out of town, like everyone else?"

"No, miss; she ain't! I did hear talk of her going on a visit to the Countess of Shirland at Eastbourne, but she still stays on, a-rummaging and a-sorting of papers day and night, in a manner of speaking. I sometimes wonder if some of them might be yours, miss?"

"No, I don't think so," returned Myra carelessly. "I suppose Mrs. Dallas would give me anything of mine she happened to find."

"I'm sure I hope so, miss," said Mrs. Dwyer, with a sniff. "Mr. Ashby, he is still away on the Continent. I heard his ma say to the Reverend Mr. McClure that he had had a few more holidays, as he had been taken unwell, and she didn't want him to hurry back. I don't think there's much the matter with him. Will you be down our way, miss? I'm sure I was always glad to see you come into the house, and so was the poor dear colonel! I'm sure if he'd been alive he'd always have had you by him! Ah! there's no knowing the mischief and muddles that comes of

jealousy ! there's no wickedness a jealous woman isn't up to !”

“ Why, Mrs. Dwyer, you frighten me !” said Myra, laughing. “ I hope we shall never meet such dreadful creatures.”

“ I'm sure I hope not ; but there's no knowing ! I'm apt to let my tongue run on when my heart is full, but I am sure I am safe with you, miss.”

“ Quite safe, Mrs. Dwyer ! This is my station, so good-bye.”

Though the out-of-season time was often Mrs. Keene's busiest, her caravansary being much frequented by the humbler class of foreigners, the doorway and entrance of the Hotel were this afternoon unoccupied. No one was to be seen for the moment, so Myra walked through to the back parlour, and, tapping gently, ventured to open the door of Mrs. Keene's sanctum without waiting for a reply. She beheld the broad toes of a pair of comfortable house-shoes crossed and upturned as though resting on the heel of one of them ; above, a voluminous black merino skirt, and the lower part of a black silk apron, while all else was hidden by the widespread sheet of the *Times*, which sloped back against something. It was held at one side by

some fat fingers, and overtopped by a tuft of lace and bright red ribbons; a gentle sound, louder than breathing, softer than snoring, broke the silence.

Myra, smiling, closed the door, and slight as was the noise, it aroused the sleeper, who dropped the paper, and sat up rubbing her eyes.

"Why! my goodness gracious, missie! are you there? I was just taking forty winks after running about the whole blessed morning! I'm sure I'm delighted to see you," rising and setting a chair for her guest. "I was going to write you a line this very afternoon, if I could have got time; that stupid, tiresome woman brought your frock here this morning, for she had never put down your address, so forgot all about it. I was going to send it up to you by parcel delivery; now you can try it on and see how it goes."

"Thank you, Mrs. Keene! and I can take it back myself."

"No, no! don't you trouble! Why, it's past five! you must be famished for want of your tea! so am I, I'm sure," and she moved swiftly towards the bell.

Mrs. Keene was a short, globular woman, with nearly white hair, and bright, beady, black eyes. She had a kindly, rosy, smiling face, and rejoiced in the

most gorgeous caps. With all her sunny good-nature, she had a will of her own, and ruled her house firmly in the frequent absence of her husband, a veteran courier, who still continued his vocation, more from love of it than any necessity.

"How have you been?" asked Myra kindly, as she removed her hat and took the proffered seat, with cheerful anticipations of tea—for she usually had a natural, healthy appetite, and the meals at Ruby Lodge were not luxurious.

"Well! I'm always well, you know. Willie had a cold, so I have sent her down to my sister's for a bit. You are looking brighter, missie! Any news of Mrs. Dallas?"

"No! she has not asked for me, and I shall not ask for her. I have no claim on her, and I shall just keep out of her way."

"Why, it's as well; but I should like to know if your father left a will, or anything in the shape of cash, behind him."

"I am sure he did not," said Myra, shaking her head. "My uncle would have been sure to tell me, and settle everything."

"I suppose so," returned Mrs. Keene with a sigh.

"Bring a slice or two of cold ham," she added to the servant who was setting the tea-tray. "I think there are some macaroons in the cupboard there; and let us have some brown bread-and-butter. Be sure you cut the ham like a wafer! Now we'll have a comfortable chat; there isn't much doing to-day."

How delightful it was to sit at tea with this genial, hospitable, humble friend! to feel so heartily welcome that her presence was a real pleasure, and to be treated as something decidedly superior! Then Mrs. Keene was the only one left who had known Myra's mother, and always spoke of her as an angel. The chains of her subordinate life seemed to fall from her and leave her free and happy, once Myra found herself within the cosy, comfortable precincts of Mrs. Keene's little parlour.

"Now, as you won't take anything more, missie, suppose you try on your dress? Then if there is any alteration, I will see to it before you take it home."

"Oh, thank you, dear Mrs. Keene. If you show me, I can do it myself. I have only too much time and I ought not to impose on your goodness!"

"I would do more than that for your mother's child, missie! Come up to Willie's room."

So saying, she opened a door beside the fireplace which Myra thought was a cupboard, and which probably had been, for it led into a short passage four or five feet square, with shelves on the left, at the further side of which was a larger space, though still small, lighted by a pane of glass over a door, which possessed a large key, bolts, and a chain. On the left of this, a narrow steep stair led upwards.

“I never was through here before,” said Myra.

“No, I dare say not. This is our own bit of a place,” returned Mrs. Keene. “We bought a scrap of a house round the corner, and opened a passage through. It just gives us three rooms for ourselves, and a couple of bedrooms for the hotel, but there’s an entrance above to them. The street-door there ain’t much good, for you may knock and knock, but if Wilhelmina or me ain’t in the parlour no one will hear. Just come up-stairs to her room; I put your dress there.”

It was a neatly kept, neatly furnished and decorated chamber; and Myra, whose love of prettiness was ardent though half-starved, looked round with a passing sensation of envy.

“What a nice room!” she cried. “It’s nicer than

mine at Munich! though that was charming; the view was lovely; and I had flowers and a *Schreibetisch*! Oh! the dress looks very nice!"

An interesting half-hour was spent in "trying-on" and "pinning" the few necessary alterations.

"Might I sit down and sew it in your parlour?" asked Myra. "It would be so pleasant to have you there, and I could try it on once more to see if it was all right."

"Yes, do, my dear! I'll be in and out and see that it goes right."

The work progressed happily, and Mrs. Keene was not called away very frequently.

"Where is Mr. Keene now? I hope he is well?" asked Myra, when her friend settled down to darn some stockings.

"Well, he is in the Black Forest somewhere, and had a shocking bad cold when he wrote last. I wish he'd make up his mind to stay at home. The hotel ain't doing badly; but law! he can't bear to be quiet. He gets that fidgety, when he is a few weeks at home, there is no doing nothing with him. Ah! a courier's is a fine life, Miss Myra, and a good position. It is just one of the good things a woman never can get."

"I am not so sure of that," said Myra. "There are courier maids now. I have seen advertisements about them. I think I should like to be one by-and-by. I wonder could Mr. Keene help me?"

"Mind, missie! you are taking that in a trifle too much; don't draw your hand so tight! Could Keene help you to go *coury-ing*? Why, gracious goodness me, Miss Myra! is that fit work for a lady?"

"I am sure I don't know, and I don't care! All I want is to earn my bread without troubling anyone; and though I do not wish to be silly, I wish—oh! how I wish I could do without Mrs. Dallas's money! You see, now I haven't a friend or a relation in the world except you, and I don't want to trouble you too much."

"That you never can," said Mrs. Keene in a low and impressive tone. "Your dear blessed mother risked her life for me, and saved mine, and I'll stand by you as long as I have a shilling. I have a few, thank God."

"It is very sweet to think I owe your great goodness to my dear mother," returned Myra softly, pausing as she drew out her thread. "Indeed, I do not mind about being a lady, but life in a school is

very dreary. I suppose I am a poor creature, but it is very hard for me to do what I don't like; it makes me stupid to try."

"But, my dear, you might easily find a place as companion to an elderly lady, and be in the right kind of position, and maybe marry some nice gentleman."

"There are so many nice young ladies, that it is not likely I should be chosen; besides, I have my own fancies. It would be very charming to marry a kind, pleasant artist. That *would* be delightful! I could wash his brushes for him, and understand a little when he talked about art, and help him in many small things. Someone like my dear father! But ah! that would be too much happiness for me!" and with a deep sigh Myra resumed her work.

Mrs. Keene gazed at her with moist eyes.

"If you please, 'm, there's a gentleman as wants a sitting-room and bed-room for a week," said one of the maids, entering.

"And couldn't you answer him without worrying me?" cried Mrs. Keene sharply, rising and rolling out of the room. Her mode of progression suggested well-oiled castors; she moved with a steady evenness.

When she returned and replaced a stocking on her plump fist, she changed the subject.

"Have you seen that gentleman you met here last week since?" she asked.

"Oh! yes; he came to see me—very kindly. He was a great friend and comrade of my father's; he used to work in his studio, and was so good to me when I was a little girl. He taught me to like English books—he gave me the few I have. How he and my father used to talk of art and music and government and politics! I liked to listen, though I did not understand. I hated to be sent to bed."

"Why, the gentleman doesn't look much over thirty-five now!"

"I am sure I do not know; he seemed about my father's age when *I* knew him; but things are rather indistinct to me. Jack—Mr. Leyton—must have been more than two years in Munich; then something or other happened, some trouble, and he went away all in a moment."

"I hope he did not leave Mr. Dallas to pay his debts," said Mrs. Keene severely.

"Oh no!" said Myra, laughing merrily. "I never

heard of it if he did. He is going to show me his pictures ; I *shall* be glad to see pictures again."

"He looked like a gentleman, I must say, though a bit dry and short in his manners." There was a pause.

"And when will Mr. Keene be back?" asked Myra, taking off her thimble, and sticking her needle in the case.

"Late in September. He has been with some old clients of his—Lady Shirland and her daughter, or rather her step-daughter. They travel about a good deal."

"How nice that must be! I suppose they are great ladies?"

"Well, they are a bit mixed. Her ladyship, you see, was very highly connected herself, but she was left early a widow, with little or nothing. Lord Shirland was a poor peer, and married late in life. Then she married a Mr. Brown—a Manchester man, rich as Cræsus—a widower with one daughter. Then *he* died, and left all his money to the daughter. She and her ladyship hit it off very well, though she is a terrible handful. She has delicate health, and if she isn't out every night of her life she must be trying

‘cures,’ and running from one doctor to another. She is very fond of Keene, and, I must say, generous and open-handed enough. Her ladyship has tried hard to marry her, but it isn’t easy ; she takes fancies and all that, and then changes her mind !”

“Lady Shirland !” repeated Myra. “My aunt—I beg her pardon : I mean Mrs. Dallas—used to know a Lady Shirland. Has she a big house in Caterham Gardens ?”

“That’s them !” exclaimed Mrs. Keene, ungrammatically.

“I never saw them,” said Myra, “but Mrs. Dallas grew rather intimate with them before my dear uncle died.”

“I called there once,” continued Mrs. Keene, “with a message from my husband, and saw the young lady—not that she is so very young ! and she just dazed me with questions. Now, my dear, you had better try that dress once more.” The “essay” was most satisfactory. “You’ll excuse me, missie, for asking, but have you another hat ?”

“No, indeed !” rather sadly. “I am afraid to ask about a hat.”

“Well, now is your time to get one cheap—the

sales are on! I'll come with you as far as Oxford Street, and find you a nice black straw hat for a couple of shillings; then a quarter of crape and a yard of ribbon will make it quite smart—leave it to me! Many and many a hat that no milliner need be ashamed of I've turned out. I'll have it ready by Saturday, if you can come and have a cup of tea."

"Dear Mrs. Keene, how good you are! That would be too delightful! I have only eighteenpence with me, but I have nearly three pounds in my money-box at home—at the school, I mean; then I must pay the dressmaker."

"You just leave it to me; I'll let you know what the whole thing comes to, and you can pay it back."

So the afternoon ended in a satisfactory transaction at a celebrated emporium, and Myra went on her homeward way almost rejoicing.

"I shall go to church on Sunday in my nice new things," were her parting words. "And I am far happier in church than anywhere; the music and the quiet, especially when it grows dusk at the evening service, make me forget the life about me!"

* * * * *

Leyton, who was a lover of sport, as well as of

art, had gone to shoot with an artist friend, who was in country quarters at a farm-house in Wales, where the lord of the manor was an old acquaintance, and gave him free range over moor and mountain, as he, the proprietor, was not to be at home that autumn.

The scenery was grand, the birds were abundant, and in the company of his chum time passed quickly; yet Leyton was constantly haunted by the picture left upon his imagination by his old comrade's daughter. The tall, slight, willowy figure, conveying an idea of delicacy and grace that needed protection; the changeful, expressive face, that seemed too transparent for the safety of its owner; the large, earnest, innocent blue eyes! Surely this desolate young creature was utterly at the mercy of a cruel world. How could any woman forsake her, as her uncle's wife had done?

"But I am an idiot to ask that," thought Leyton, as he put up his sketching apparatus one evening, when the fading light compelled him to desist. "Who can say what a woman is capable of? They can be exquisitely tender and infinitely cruel, false or faithful, according to the impulse that

moves them. Are they responsible for their variability? God knows! perhaps the most potent charm the dear devils possess is their uncertainty. Could a strong reasonable woman be attractive? I doubt it; at any rate, I have had no chance of trying! I wonder if that innocent-looking, soft-eyed darling will break some fellow's heart? or break her own? Both, probably, and both will get mended and hide their scars, and pass an apparently flawless life to high fortune, perhaps, or to a pauper's grave! I should like to secure her a chance of going straight—protection, kindly shelter! What a splendid model she would be for that picture I am thinking of! But I'll not ask her; not to insure success and a thundering big price; no, it would never do! I must see what's to be done with Lady Shirland and Dorothea. I am about the most useless friend she could have." Arriving at this discouraging conclusion, Leyton shouldered his traps and walked off towards his temporary home at a swinging pace.

The next day he returned to London. Thursday—the much-anticipated Thursday—was a clear, sunny, autumnal day. Myra arrayed herself in her new

dress and hat, and heartily endorsed Mrs. Keene's opinion of her own skill in millinery.

"I really look quite nice! only I wish my gloves were newer; but that doesn't matter much."

It was rather a long walk from Ruby Lodge to the studio; and Leyton had glanced more than once at an old French clock on the high mantelshelf, the hands of which pointed to 4.10 when he muttered—

"She is behind time; she can't have forgotten! but something newer may have turned up."

He put down his palette, and went to a table on which stood a motley tea equipage—three cups, one of rare china, the others quite common, all different, a glass cream-jug, a bright but battered tin teapot, and a small brass spirit-kettle, the lamp of which he proceeded to light. Then he gave a touch or two to some flowers in a china bowl—mignonette and big yellow daisies—while a smaller, choicer nosegay occupied a glass vase. The studio was, as he had said, rather bare—a couple of big Japanese screens, some very dusty, worm-eaten, carved oak chairs, a few plain Windsor ones, some broad strips of richly coloured Japanese paper, and one tapestried panel with a few bits of embroidered drapery, were but a

scanty plenishing, compared to the luxurious accessories usual in a modern *atelier*. As Leyton paused to contemplate his dispositions, an exceedingly discordant bell tinkled hysterically. He hastened to open the door, which was hidden behind the biggest of the screens, and admitted Myra: Myra, looking so bright, so fresh, so elegant in her nicely fitting frock and pretty hat, and so flushed by her rapid walk, that she seemed a different being from the pale, sad child he had talked to last week.

“I began to be afraid you had forgotten me!” was Leyton’s greeting, as he looked behind her in vain for the chaperon he had suggested. “Couldn’t Mrs.—what’s her name?—come?”

“Forgotten!” cried Myra, as she followed him into the room. “Why, I thought the day would never come! As to Mrs. Keene, I did not ask her; she is always busy, and I did not want her.”

“Well, I am sure *I* don’t want her!” exclaimed Leyton, yielding to a momentary impulse. “You and I have enough to talk of about the old days in Munich, without a stranger.”

“Mrs. Keene is not a stranger, though,” returned Myra. “She used to be in Munich too, both before and

after you, and when I came to London she found me out, and has been so good. - Why, she trimmed this hat for me."

"Indeed! it is a work of art!" eyeing it with grave admiration. "Now you must have a cup of tea before you look round."

"Oh! I don't care for any tea, Jack——" began Myra.

"Well, I do! Come, you must 'pour out' for me. I don't know when I had a lady to pour out tea before!"

"Oh! very well; if you want your tea, that is different;" and Myra sat down, drawing a long pin from her hat and putting it aside unasked.

"You have a nice large studio," was her next remark, "and a very good light."

"Yes. It will be awfully cold in winter, though."

"You have not been in it long?"

"Only since last April."

Delightful rambling talk ensued, old German memories moving Myra to tears and smiles.

It was a long time since Leyton had enjoyed a talk so much. Myra brought with her an atmosphere of innocent youthful candour, of April

freshness, dashed with tears of tender sorrow, that seemed to melt away the bitterness, the hard indifference, which had congealed his spirit of later years. But under her temporary lightness was an undertone of profound sadness; and after laughing sympathetically at some reminiscences of old Hedwig's tyranny, her face would quickly resume its pensive expression, her eyes their far-away look.

"But I haven't seen your work yet," she said suddenly; and rising, she began to walk slowly round while Leyton put aside the not-too-steady tea-table.

"What a quantity of fighting and Oriental subjects!" she said at length. "I do not care for them very much! That man there, praying against those bars of vivid crimson and yellow light in the sky, is very good—oh! very; you feel that he *is* praying, not merely saying prayers! And, Jack, *this* is lovely! these autumn woods on the bank of the lake or river so still and deep, with the brown and golden leaves that have fallen on the water; one almost feels the air with the scent of the trees upon it. Where is that delightful place, Jack?"

"I do not think that exact locality exists, Myra. I have mixed two or three to produce it."

"I could look at it for hours! I wish—how I wish I might even draw with you, Jack!"

She took up a piece of chalk with a murmured "May I?" sat down by a table on which lay a sheet of grey paper, and began to copy a group of trees which stood on a smaller easel.

Leyton watched her for some minutes.

"Good!" he said at last. "You have a good broad style, an expressive touch. I wish I could teach you, Myra; but it is quite out of the question."

"I am so sorry! I only meant now, while the holidays last."

"Just so," returned Leyton abruptly.

"Very well," said Myra humbly; then turning to another newly begun sketch, "This will be pretty."

"Yes; it is a bit of Hampstead Heath, quite near." Then with a sudden impulse he exclaimed, "By the way, if you would care to sketch it, you could join me there of an afternoon. I will tell you where we can meet."

"If I care!" cried Myra, clasping her hands. "It would be only too delightful."

"Then to-morrow, about 3.30, meet me at the Loudon Road station, and I'll pilot you. Never

mind pencil or paper; I'll manage all that. Have you ever tried water-colours?"

"Oh, yes! I have dabbled in everything long ago."

"Well, try chalk this time, just to get your hand in."

"It will be *himmlisch*!" cried Myra.

"Now look here. This is the sketch of your father I did nearly six years ago."

"Ah—" a long-drawn "ah," as Myra stood with clasped hands before it; then she sank into a chair.

Leyton saw that her eyes were full of tears, and her lips were trembling.

"I hope to heaven she won't have a fit of crying!" he thought. But she struggled gallantly for self-mastery.

"You like it?" asked Leyton at last.

"It is a treasure!" she said.

"I will copy it on a smaller scale for you! Now, Myra, I will walk back with you! Your visit has given me so much pleasure!"

"And to me!" murmured Myra, holding out her hand to him.

CHAPTER VI.

MASTER AND PUPIL.

SUMMER of the year of grace in which the events here recorded took place was wet, dull, and unseasonable ; but when August came Nature seemed to be tired of the sulks, and smiled upon her saddened subjects. It was a delicious month, sunny without being sultry ; full of rich colour, with just the faintest crisp touch in the air to make exercise a joy, and the atmosphere light and clear.

It was perfect weather for sketching, and once more, after the long spell of grey cloud and misty sorrow that had shaded her young days, Myra felt that existence was a joy ; that to breathe, to look, to listen were each a blessing. In this expansive mood she felt obliged to show her work to cook, failing any other critic ; for her good friend Mrs. Keene had been suddenly summoned to Dover, where her husband had met with a very inconvenient

accident. Stepping from the gangway on to the pier, his hands full of parcels, some sudden movement of the boat (for it was a rough day) made him lose his balance. He fell, his right foot catching in the rope which secured the gangway, and sprained his ankle severely. His wife had some difficulty in conveying him to his own home, and Myra felt it was as well to refrain from her accustomed visits.

Cook admired the sketches immensely, and was of opinion that they were worth money.

"If you can do the like of that, miss, you might do better than staying on here," said that sage counsellor.

"Oh! I ought to have a great deal more teaching before I could earn any money. I should not have done half so well if Mr. Leyton had not helped me — the gentleman who came to see me, you know."

"H'oh!" said the cook. "Well, it *is* nice to be taught;" and she paused abruptly, leaving the impression on Myra's mind that, for some mysterious reason, she did not quite approve of these lessons.

This did not, however, affect her spirits, and she started with her usual alacrity to meet Leyton at

their very unromantic trysting-place. From the Hampstead Heath station it was a pleasant walk to the spot Leyton had selected, and the new old friends were sufficiently sympathetic to enjoy each other's companionship even when silent, as they often were.

They had worked together nearly every day for a week, and Leyton was a good deal struck by the natural taste and ability displayed by his companion.

"I had a letter from Mrs. Keene the day before yesterday," said Myra suddenly, when, after pointing out some faults in her work, he had resumed his own.

"What did she write about?"

"To tell me that Mr. Keene had met with an accident. He sprained his ankle, and she has gone down to Dover to nurse him."

"Ah, indeed! By the way, was he not travelling with Lady Shirland and her daughter?"

"Yes."

"Are they in town?"

"I do not know."

"I must find out. Lady Shirland is some sort of remote connection of mine. She is very good-natured."

"Is she?" said Myra indifferently.

"I should like you to know her."

"Why?" asked Myra. "She would not care to know *me*!"

"How do you know?" asked Leyton; and there was a brief silence while he worked-in some shadows, and then contemplated the effect. "The fact is," he resumed, "you ought to know more women—only women can be of use to you."

"How is that, Jack? No woman could teach me to draw as well as you do! That is really being of use!"

"I wish I could be of more use to you, Myra! but—I may not be here—I think of going—somewhere in the winter."

"The winter! that is a long way off! so do not talk of it now. Jack, I wish you would not go! It is cruel to have found just *one* friend and then to lose him!"

"Have I grown such a fatherly old buffer that she talks in this way to me?" thought Leyton, stealing a glance at the delicately rounded cheek and small ear next to him. "So much the better! It makes these lessons possible, only they must not go on too long."

"You know," he said aloud, "we brothers of the brush must go after the light—there is no light to be had in winter in London."

"I know that," returned Myra sighing.

"What I thought of, respecting Lady Shirland, is this: she has a daughter, a step-daughter rather, who is an invalid and full of whims. She plays a little, sings a little, paints a little—does a little of everything. Suppose she took a fancy to you and asked you to be her companion—to play, and draw, and sing with her—it——"

"I should not like it at all," said Myra.

"It would surely be a better and easier life than that of a teacher in a school?"

"I am not so sure," reflectively. "My work at school will at least be clearly defined; then, I shall not remain there."

"Where do you think of going, Myra?" with surprise. "What wild scheme have you in your head?"

"I cannot tell you yet; I have only a glimpse of something."

"Do you not care to confide in me?"

"I have nothing to confide yet. I shall tell you when I have, if you are not far away."

The composure of her tone surprised him. He expected to see her blue eyes full of tears at the prospect of losing him; not that Leyton was a conceited jackanapes, but her manner had been so confiding, her pleasure in his society so frankly displayed, he had begun to fear that the prospect of his absence would have been a terrible blow. So she had a strain of independent life beneath her soft, innocent seeming!

“It is very hard for a girl to carry out any plan unassisted, Myra, and you must not throw away substance for a shadow.”

“I am not easily frightened,” she returned with a sigh. “You see, I have only myself to think of—I am quite alone.”

“Well, if I can arrange with Lady Shirland to come to my studio, you will not refuse to meet her and Miss Brown?”

“Oh no! if they are friends of yours and you wish it!”

“Yes, I do, particularly; but I am not sure if they are in town. I must find out.”

“Thank you,” said Myra, and a long pause ensued.

Leyton was meditating on the glimpse he had caught of Myra's inner self; it made him vaguely uneasy. Independence and individuality were dangerous qualities in a girl situated as she was. Self-distrust and timidity would be safer ingredients.

"Would you like to study seriously? to try to be an artist?" he asked presently.

"It would be enchanting; but I know enough to know I have no really great gift; and how could I live while I studied?"

"You might do landscape well, and there is a market for landscape."

Myra did not reply; she sat looking at her work, and then began to put her pencils in their case.

"Yes," said Leyton, noticing the movement, "the light has changed; we had better be going. How much longer do the holidays last?"

"About a fortnight; at least, mine will be at an end then, for Mrs. Fairchild comes back, and I shall not be able to go out!"

"Then we had better make hay while the sun shines; but I shall be engaged to-morrow. The day after, we might try that clump of trees in the hollow; I have done nearly all I want to this study. It is

difficult to get the effect of foliage. I suppose you have never studied the human figure?"

"Never. I used to do heads with my father, and I loved them."

They had put their traps together, and were walking homewards.

"It is so fine that we might walk all the way if it would not be too much for you."

"Too much for me? Oh, I can walk miles!"

"You don't look as if you could," said Leyton, letting his eyes dwell upon her with the kindly, compassionate expression she always found there. "I should not say you were strong."

"I am always well, Jack, but I generally grow very tired when I walk with tiresome people."

"Thank you," said Leyton with a smile. "I am glad you do not consider me a bore."

"You! Oh, you are delightful—at least to me; other people might not think so; but you only remind me of happy days; and you are very good."

"I am afraid your view of this subject is quite original, Myra. Tell me, do you like any of the books I sent you?"

"Yes; the essays are charming, and the stories,

they make me envious, for every one of them ends so happily, and the good people are rewarded ! ”

“ Why, you young sceptic, do you think there is no joy, no justice in real life ? Perhaps this time next year may see you radiant with happiness and filled with content.”

“ Do you think that likely, Jack ? ”

“ Likely ! I cannot say ; but to a young creature like you—how old are you : nineteen ?—all things are possible.”

“ Ah ! ” said Myra, and stopped, her eyes full of tears, her lips quivering.

“ For God’s sake, don’t cry ! ” exclaimed Leyton abruptly. “ You don’t know the effect tears—your tears—would have upon me. It is all so cruel.”

“ No ; I will not ! ” she returned, startled out of her melting mood by his sudden vehemence. “ It is cowardly and foolish ! Does not some English poet say ‘ To bear is to conquer one’s fate ? ’ ”

“ Yes ; but the advice is seldom acted on.”

There was a pause, then Leyton started another topic, and they found the road back to Ruby Lodge amazingly short.

The next day Leyton walked across the parks

to Caterham Gardens to inquire for Lady Shirland and her daughter. He found they had only rested in London for three days, previous to travelling north, and were not expected back for some time.

Help in that quarter, therefore, was for the present out of the question. Leyton was a good deal exercised on the subject of his old friend's daughter. There was not in the world a more desolate creature, and she evidently was afflicted with that almost fatal combination, a loving heart and an independent spirit. He sat long after his solitary dinner in the very commonplace lodging he occupied near his studio, and thought earnestly and painfully of the lonely waif who had so unexpectedly crossed his path.

"I am just the very most useless friend she could have!" he thought, "and I would give anything to serve her. I haven't a character for steadiness, and I have grown so infernally cross-grained that I am not exactly popular. Would it be wisest and kindest to leave her to her fate? I might make a horrible hash of it all if I meddle, and do her more harm than good. I'm not old enough to be fatherly, and I am too poor to marry, even if I felt inclined to commit

that folly, which I am not. I don't suppose I can ever feel true ideal sentimental love again; and yet I am afraid the touch of her dainty hands, the trusting sweetness of her eyes, might stir the electricity that now lies sleeping, in a way I am ashamed to think of; and she, poor child! friendless as she is, might learn to love even a rugged fellow like myself; and then—and then, I doubt if I should thank her for it; we are all inclined to be horribly cruel to women who give us unsought love! No! by Heaven! I'll do the right thing, and do it before it is too hard to be done! We are drifting already. How long is it since I met her in that unlucky hotel? Barely a month. I must go out once more to that bit of Elysium up on the heath, and then unflinchingly cut short this pretty idyll. I'll go away and stay away till this infernal school is in full swing; but I will try to interest Lady Shirland in Myra; *she* could be a very useful friend to her if she liked. Yes, I must put an end to this platonic affair, or it will solve itself in a different fashion."

So thinking, he drew over a sketching-block, and began to draw his young pupil in an attitude that was specially stamped upon his mind, standing, her

face turned from him and showing the graceful throat and ear, and part of the delicate chin. He had sketched this more than once, though he steadily refrained from putting her features on canvas or paper. Then he sat long in deep thought, resting his head on his hand, while the magic lantern of memory placed picture after picture before his eyes.

Leyton's life had been rather a failure in many ways, and to himself a profound disappointment. The younger son of a good family, he had gone into the Indian cavalry, and as long as there was anything like active service to be done, he did well. An unemployed season or two, and a tyrannical martinet colonel, who was always harassing his officers about petty details, made him thoroughly disgusted with the life he had chosen. About this time a certain officer of artillery chose to retire on account of health, and departed for England with his fascinating wife, for whom Leyton had formed one of those profound, passionate attachments of which few men or women are capable. He threw up his commission, followed them to London, and took up art as his future calling. He had decided ability, and in order to study he established himself at Munich, a favourite

place with Colonel ———, who was a bit of a connoisseur, a German scholar in a small way, and a *soi-disant* philosopher of the needles-and-pins kind, who generally managed to scratch whatever hand attempted to stroke him. Since he was blessed with an exalted opinion of himself, and a decided disregard for everyone else, it was not difficult to evade his perception, so the lovers were enabled to enjoy many happy hours with safety and a due regard to appearances.

This was a halcyon time indeed. Leyton made immense progress in his art; it seemed to him that he could conquer the world! He succeeded in getting a picture admitted to the Salon, and another into the Royal Academy. Though he had been anything but careful, some of his capital still remained to him. All was bright, when one day, rather suddenly, his lady-love's husband died, leaving his widow fairly well off, but by no means abundantly provided for. This happy event, as Leyton considered it, seemed to have removed the only barrier to his complete happiness. Now they could belong to each other in the face of society. Alas! before fifteen months were over, Leyton's adored mistress

was the wife of a wealthy citizen of famous London town.

She was very tender and touching in her explanations. It was impossible for her to face poverty; she had had a miserably sordid existence, and she must emancipate herself from it; besides, she did not wish to cripple her dear Jack! Then their charming friendship might be renewed later, and——

To Jack Leyton it seemed as if hell had yawned before him. Moralists might justly shake their heads at his past life; but to him the woman he loved had degraded herself below the reach of love, beyond the possibility of redemption. Chaos was indeed come again, and for a while despair and disillusion dragged him down to depths he had never before touched.

Meantime, the woman who had wrecked his life floated triumphantly upwards, secure in her discarded lover's chivalrous silence.

At last time, and work as the war-correspondent and artist to an illustrated paper, helped him to bridge the gulf that parted the present from the past. Bruised and maimed in heart and mind, travel-stained and torn by the brambles and briers and mud

through which he had dragged himself, he began to struggle back into the ranks he had for a while forsaken.

For him Myra had a double interest—as the daughter of a man for whom he had had a warm regard, and because she was associated with the glorious days when he dwelt in “The Venusberg”—before he was so unwillingly emancipated from the soul-destroying spell.

* * * * *

Myra used the “off” day on which Leyton was engaged, to call at Mrs. Keene’s hotel, and found she was expected to return with her invalided husband that evening. Mr. Keene was progressing as well as could be expected, the chamber-maid informed her. Miss Wilhelmina was still away, and not expected for a day or two. So Myra walked back, cheerfully thinking of to-morrow, and persuading herself to write to Mrs. Fairchild for the key of one of the pianos. She might as well practise to fill up her time.

The next morning brought a note from Leyton postponing their appointment to the following day,

and informing her that inexorable business would probably call him out of town next week.

Myra grew cold as she read, and yet the terrible announcement did not surprise her. After the severe schooling through which she had passed, it seemed impossible that blue skies and sunshine could ever last. Had this blissful interlude continued longer, it would only have intensified the bitterness of its ending! Besides, she had no right to trouble Jack Leyton; she was accustomed to be looked upon as a burden—an unnecessary item for whom there was scarcely a place in this crowded stage. So she must not murmur at the inevitable nor strive to hold what was fated to slip from her grasp.

But in spite of her philosophy, she wept long and bitterly through the silence of a sleepless night, and looked so pale and wan the following day, that cook improvised a basin of broth in the forenoon, and insisted that Myra should swallow the larger part of it.

The fates were against her, poor child, for the weather changed, and a week of rain and storm set in, which forbade all plans for sketching, and reduced her to the profoundest depression.

Leyton himself did not feel particularly cheerful. He missed Myra's companionship more than he expected, but this sense of loss made him more resolute to resist the temptation of indulging in it. He was rather surprised that she had not answered his note, and he certainly could not leave London without seeing her. So one wild, damp afternoon, when the wind was shaking down the sere and yellow leaves into the puddles and mud, he arrived at Ruby Lodge, and was admitted by the front door.

Myra was not in the room when he entered, and he felt a little anxious, even nervous, lest she should look miserable, and perhaps shed tears. She certainly looked very white when she did come, but she smiled brightly, and her eyes were clear and calm.

"It is very good of you to come! I was afraid you would go away without seeing me," she said, giving him her small cold hand.

"I could not have gone away without seeing you, Myra! I assure you, I have missed my pupil sorely! But the clerk of the weather has shut up the school. I fancy we are having the equinox unusually early."

"Perhaps! At all events, I am glad to see you again to thank you for some happy days. They will be pleasant to think about; for one can always keep a memory to rest one's eyes upon."

Leyton did not answer directly, but after a brief pause, took up a small parcel he had laid on the table, and handing it to Myra, said—

"This is the copy of your father's picture which I promised you. I am afraid I have lost the likeness a little."

Myra's eyes sparkled as she hastily undid the paper in which it was folded, and uttered an exclamation of pleasure as they fell upon it.

"Perhaps it is a shade less like than your original sketch, but oh! it *is* good, it is his own dear face!" She stopped. He could see her teeth pressed upon her under lip in the effort to maintain her composure.

"You have given me a treasure," she said, holding out her hand to him with a gracious yet dignified gesture as soon as she could command her voice.

Leyton took it in both his own, and obeying an irresistible impulse, kissed it gently. "I wish I could be a more useful friend to you, Myra! but it is

not easy for a poor Bohemian artist, like myself, to be of much use to anyone. You want women friends, and no doubt you will make them. Remember, Myra, that whenever you are in any real difficulty you must not hesitate to send for me! I will do all and everything in my power to help you, and I shall always keep you informed as to where I am to be found. I suppose I may write to you?—your letters are not opened?”

“My letters—oh! I never have any. No, I do not think anyone would interfere with them. I am a teacher now.”

“True, I had forgotten your dignified position. Then I will let you know what I am about from time to time, and you must answer!”

“Of course I shall! But, Jack, you ought to be a *great* artist. There is something in your pictures I cannot quite put into words. Something more than real-looking trees, and water, and distance; they tell a story—they tell of joy or sorrow, or anger or despair. Oh, I cannot quite say what I want.”

“You say it remarkably well,” returned Jack, smiling, “and you rouse my ambition, which has been dead or sleeping.”

"Do not let it sleep! Oh! how delighted I should be to read about you in the papers. I used to see long critiques in the papers at Uncle Edward's about painting and music and theatres."

"Well, Myra, I will do my best! I suppose I may come and see you when I return?"

"Oh yes! When will that be?"

"I am not sure; a couple of months. Here is my address for about three weeks. It is on the west coast of Scotland."

"Thank you! you *have* been good to me! If I never see you again, I shall always remember you with pleasure." The large dark blue eyes he admired looked yearningly into his.

"Not see me again!" exclaimed Leyton. "Why, of course you shall. You shall not get rid of me so easily."

Myra laughed. "I do not want to get rid of you, Jack."

"And your breathing-space will soon be over?"

"Yes! but I am not sorry; there will be plenty to do, and on the whole the girls are not unkind; none of them care much about me, except two of the little ones, but they are merry, and they amuse

me. I shall be so proud to show them the sketches I did with you."

It was on Leyton's lips to say, "Don't mention the matter," but looking in her face he paused, and decided to risk anything rather than suggest the faintest necessity for concealment.

"I have tied up all the books you lent me, and was going to leave them at your studio, but the weather has been so bad."

"Yes—yes, of course; I will take them with me now, and—I must go, Myra!"

"I suppose so! good-bye! Be very ambitious, and then you will be very successful. Good-bye!"

Leyton held her hand for a moment between his own two; but he resisted the inclination to kiss it again.

"Good-bye, Myra," he said softly, and taking the parcel of books he went away.

Myra stood for some minutes where he had left her, her hands clasped, her lip quivering; then she brushed the moisture from her eyes, sat down, and drawing her father's portrait to her, tenderly kissed the dear familiar face.

Leyton walked rapidly towards his own abode.

"That's well ended," he thought. "But there's more in her than I supposed! she was calmer and far less moved than I was. I have alarmed myself unnecessarily. I am an old friend to her, and nothing more. Yet it is wiser and better to get away. There is more strength in her than could be expected from that gentle, willowy creature. I think Lady Shirland would take to her; as to the adorable Dorothea, it is impossible to say what she might do—establish a tyrannical protectorate over the sweet waif, or hate her like poison. Most women are inexplicable. Even Myra may not be the angel she seems! I should like to have the chance of studying her character. I fancy there are tangled skeins in it; but it would be better not—much better not."

CHAPTER VII.

THE TURN OF THE TIDE.

THE remainder of the holidays was a neutral-tinted blank to Myra.

The gleam of sunshine that had brightened her dreary path for a moment had faded, and all was leaden-coloured and misty again; yet she did not absolutely mope. To let herself think—when thought only convinced her that “a smile and a grasp of the hand hastening on” was all she could hope for of intercourse with her father’s friend, the one creature associated with the dear bygone days—was intolerable. She must be “doing” to keep herself mentally free from pain. Moreover, the lesson her isolated existence had cut deep into her heart was, that she had no claim on anyone, that she must trust to herself and trouble no one. There were times when this cruel knowledge pressed its sting painfully into her soul; then the blessed buoyancy of youth floated her

up over these depths; for "there's a time when hope deceives us, and we dream of bright days to come." Persistent, unrelieved melancholy can only end in the madhouse.

The cook found among the keys confided to her care one which unlocked a piano, so Myra found some diversion in trying all the music she could lay her hands on; also in visiting Mrs. Keene, and conversing with the disabled courier, who seemed to Myra's inexperience a very well-bred, accomplished person.

It was pleasant, too, to converse with his granddaughter, a girl somewhat younger than herself.

Her father had been Keene's only son by his first marriage. She had lost both parents, but they were well replaced by her adoring grandfather and step-grandmother, who had no children of her own.

These occupations, added to needlework, kept her busy till Mrs. Fairchild's return set the machinery of the establishment going, and made Myra think at times that the delightful interlude of her renewed acquaintance with Leyton was the baseless fabric of a dream.

Mrs. Fairchild returned in improved health, and

consequently in improved temper, though on the whole she was of wonderfully even temperament. The end of the term, however, might well ruffle the equanimity of a whole angelic choir. Then she was to reopen with all her old and three new pupils, and she flattered herself that her arrangement with Myra was not a bad stroke of business.

It was nearly a week after her return before Mrs. Fairchild had time for any conversation with the young German-teacher on personal matters.

"You are still looking very pale and thin, Miss Dallas," she said, darting a sharp glance at her as they sat together after their frugal supper. "I trust and hope you are not going to knock up at the beginning of the term! It would put me out dreadfully."

"I feel quite strong, I assure you, Mrs. Fairchild! and I have enjoyed my holidays, for I did some sketching up at Hampstead. May I show you what I have done?"

"Yes! fetch me your work."

Myra obeyed.

"It isn't bad for that style," said Mrs. Fairchild carelessly; "but it doesn't bear close inspection. How

did you manage? you did not go and sit on the heath alone?"

"Oh! no. I met a gentleman, an old friend of my father's, an artist whom I used to know long ago, and as *he* was making some sketches himself, he let me work beside him."

"A gentleman? was he an old gentleman?" sharply.

"No, not old; younger than my father, and——"

"Why, Miss Dallas, this was rather imprudent," interrupted Mrs. Fairchild. "Pray what sort of man is he? what's his name?"

"He is very nice indeed, and very kind. He knew me when I was a child; his name is Leyton. He is tall and rather dark, and I'm sure I don't know how old he is—perhaps thirty or forty."

"That is a very vague statement! I think your own sense of propriety might have suggested the presence of another lady?"

"But I never dreamed of wanting anyone else! What harm could there be in going with Jack Leyton?"

"Don't—*pray* don't, Miss Dallas!" cried the outraged schoolmistress, with a shiver of horror.

“Do not name any man with such appalling familiarity! You distress me greatly. Imagine any of our neighbours seeing you walk off constantly with a dissipated (they are *all* dissipated) young man. What a character they would give of you and of my house! Why, it is enough to injure my establishment, my prospects, my——”

“But, Mrs. Fairchild, how could that be?” interrupted Myra, opening her eyes with astonishment. “Jack—Mr. Leyton is a gentleman, and very good to me, and an old friend. What harm could there be in——?”

“Myra Dallas,” solemnly, “if your own rectitude and sense of propriety do not suggest a true view of the case, no words of mine can enlighten you.”

Myra was silent with astonishment for a minute.

“Nothing could persuade me that it is wrong to sit and sketch beside an old friend,” she said very quietly at length. “But if you disapprove, of course I shall not do it again; nor is it likely I can, for Mr. Leyton has gone away to Scotland, and I do not know when he will return.”

“So much the better!” ejaculated Mrs. Fairchild.

“Your upbringing has evidently been most defective ; but if you undertake to be guided by me, I shall say no more about this deplorable indiscretion ! You are not a bad girl, Myra, but quite incapable of seeing the true aspect of things. Now I am going to make up my books, so you may go to your room if you like.”

And Myra went, with fresh food for thought, for painful wonder. What strange doctrine was this propounded by Mrs. Fairchild ? It was too ridiculous ; she (Myra) would ask Jack, when they met again, if anyone save Mrs. Fairchild herself could see wrong-doing in so simple an act as a lady and gentleman walking and sketching together. Suddenly she felt her cheeks aflame ; could she ask Jack this question ? No ! she dare not ; the bloom of fresh innocence that thinks no evil had been rudely brushed away ; so infinitely more suggestive are the fig-leaves of propriety than the noble nakedness of simple humanity.

Without distinctly thinking through the uncomfortable puzzle, Myra felt that an impalpable, yet most perceptible barrier had been raised between Leyton and herself. “It is really no matter,” was

her final conclusion. "I don't suppose I shall ever see much of him again."

* * * * *

Ruby Lodge was itself again, and the routine of work was in full swing. Myra was soon very busy; for, besides her German class, Mrs. Fairchild found heaps of small services, which were no one's particular duty, for Myra to perform; nor did she object. She hoped she was growing more alert and practical; she was less frequently reproached for "dreaming" and "mooning" than she used to be, and had decidedly increased in popularity with the girls.

It was a damp, drizzling day at the end of October, and somewhat late in the afternoon. Myra had been directing the practice of a rather backward music pupil in the lower school-room, and thought she had heard the sound of a cab stopping, but took little heed, as she ascended to her own tiny chamber, intending to devote a spare half-hour to some necessary darning, when the parlour-maid almost startled her out of her wits by presenting her with a card.

"Mrs. Edward Dallas; will you see the lady, miss?"

"No! yes! perhaps I had better," hesitated Myra.

"She is in the drawing-room, miss."

"Myra turned and went somewhat slowly to that state apartment. What fresh stab was her uncle's widow going to inflict?

When she entered, she found Mrs. Dallas standing on the hearth-rug, her eyes fixed upon the door.

"Ah, Myra!" she exclaimed, coming to meet her, both hands outstretched. "You are no doubt surprised to see me. You will be still more surprised when I tell you why!"

Amazed at the change in her aunt's voice, manner, expression, Myra could not speak, but silently gave her hands to those so eagerly extended.

"I have come to ask your forgiveness, Myra, for what must have seemed my unaccountable harshness; to explain that I have suspected you wrongfully, and to endeavour to atone for the past."

"I *am* greatly surprised! Indeed, I never did anything to deserve your dislike!" said Myra, gazing at her not without distrust.

"I know you did not—I know it now; but for a long time I believed you had made sad mischief between your uncle and myself. Let me tell you all about it." She sat down on the sofa, and drew Myra to her side, holding her hand while she spoke, her eyes growing moist as if from suppressed feeling.

"You will remember, no doubt, the sudden change in my manner and conduct towards you about a year and a half ago—the last time you spent any holidays with us?"

Myra thought hard, but in vain. Mrs. Dallas had been always much the same.

"I cannot quite remember," she said hesitatingly, "but I am not very observant."

"You are a singularly guileless creature, Myra! Alas, *I* remember the time but too well. It was then that I had the only misunderstanding with my dear husband which ever arose between us! He broke out into reproaches against me one evening, accusing me of unkindness and injustice to *you*, and much more. I will not dwell upon these cruel details; enough to say that I believed you had incited him to this outbreak, as he had been to see you that

very day. I confess to being greatly embittered against you, and determined you should never reside under my roof."

"Of course you did! but I never said a word," began Myra.

"I know you did not. Just listen, my dear! Searching through my dear husband's papers, I discovered, only yesterday, two or three letters addressed to him by a bad, cruel woman, now dead, who hated me, and would stop at nothing to injure me and separate me from my husband. In these letters I found all the accusations which your uncle made against me. This was the reason of his attack upon me; and you, towards whom I have been so harsh, so unjust, are innocent!" She let go Myra's hand to press her handkerchief to her eyes.

"How dreadfully wicked!" ejaculated her hearer; "but how *could* you believe I would make my poor uncle uncomfortable? He was so fond of you!"

"Ah! he was indeed! and I have been so unkind to his favourite niece! Can you forgive me, Myra? Oh! can you forgive me?"

"Oh, yes! I can indeed! I am so glad you have

discovered the truth. I never could make out why you did not like me, and I don't think you did from the first !”

“ You are mistaken, Myra ! I used to be hurt by your coldness and shyness—that would have passed away but for the work of the base mischief-maker ! Now, my dear child, my most ardent desire is to atone for my past unkindness ; you must come and live with me, and be my daughter. I am terribly lonely, Myra ! Lionel is so much sought after that I scarcely see him ; and now, when the years grow long and wearisome, you must come and cheer me up—you must return good for evil.”

“ Do you really mean it ? ” exclaimed Myra, somewhat puzzled, and not too ready to accept this offer. A sort of fear that some other discovery might again change the present radiant state of affairs made her less effusively grateful than Mrs. Dallas expected.

“ Ah ! ” she cried, “ I see you cannot forgive me ; the sense of my unkindness still rankles.”

“ No ! indeed it does not. If you really care for my company, I am sure you are welcome to it ! but I am afraid Mrs. Fairchild will not like me to leave

till Christmas ; and *I* should not like to displease her, for she has been kind to me in her way."

"Till Christmas! Oh, nonsense! she must not be selfish. I shall settle about that!"

"I know it is not easy to find a German teacher, and——"

"I cannot have you roughing it here to suit Mrs. Fairchild's convenience," interrupted Mrs. Dallas. "Not, indeed, that I have a very luxurious home to offer you, dear Myra—my means are limited since my dear husband's death. Still, you shall have a tiny room all to yourself, and as comfortable as I can make it; and I shall be so glad to hear you play and sing, or read——" She talked on in the same strain for a few minutes, while Myra felt inclined to pinch herself to test her wakefulness—it all seemed so like a strange contradictory dream.

"The sooner I see Mrs. Fairchild the better," her aunt was saying, when Myra succeeded in convincing herself she was awake.

"I will go for her, aunt—shall I come back?"

"Yes, if you like."

"You see, I do not want to put her out."

“You are very considerate of Mrs. Fairchild, Myra! perhaps you would prefer staying with her?”

“Yesterday I should,” returned Myra. “To-day things are changed;” and she left the room.

Mrs. Dallas leaned back in the corner of the sofa and heaved a deep sigh; then a look of quiet contented thought stole over her handsome dark face, and she remained profoundly still, meditating on some deeply interesting subject, till Mrs. Fairchild, followed by Myra, came in.

A brisk discussion ensued between the two elder ladies, Mrs. Fairchild being very reluctant to let Myra go, and apparently greatly puzzled by Mrs. Dallas’s change of mood.

As to the slight explanation offered by the latter, which of course did not include the particulars related to Myra, Mrs. Fairchild scarcely attended to it. She evidently considered the whole a mere whim, and even ventured in very plain terms to call Mrs. Dallas’s attention to the fact that in removing Myra from an occupation which would enable her to earn her bread, she incurred the responsibility of providing for her.

"I am quite aware of it," returned Mrs. Dallas loftily.

Finally, as Myra stuck loyally to her engagement, it was agreed that Mrs. Fairchild should look out diligently for a German governess, and as soon as one was found Myra should be permitted to take up her abode with her affectionate and penitent aunt. In any case she was to be free at Christmas.

For the first time in the course of their acquaintance Mrs. Dallas kissed Myra at parting.

"And I may call you aunt now?" asked the latter, as she accompanied that lady to the door.

"That is an unkind little speech, Myra. Yes, of course you may! The reason I wished to break with you is removed, and I am but too glad to have a relative of my dear husband near me. Remember, you are to spend Sunday with me! Be sure you come early; we shall discuss all our plans at leisure."

Myra was almost stunned by this extraordinary change in the face of affairs, and thankful when she could think over the matter in the silence and darkness of her own room.

Really Mrs. Dallas was very kind. Of course it was but natural that she should be irritated against

her (Myra) when she thought her a mean mischief-maker! If Mrs. Dallas continued pleasant and friendly, it would be far nicer to live with her than at school, and Myra resolved to be bright and complaisant, and grateful too. But she rather wished that Lionel was not to be of the party. She did not like Lionel. At one time she had rather liked him, but she felt an odd sort of fear of his eyes, which was, she told herself, very foolish.

The more Myra thought of this curious turn in the current of her life, the more content she felt. It was quite likely that a woman of strong quick feeling like Mrs. Dallas, in her anxiety to atone for past injustice, might grow to love where she first disliked, and Myra was quite ready to give affection freely in return for any bestowed on herself. Life might be happy enough with her aunt, as she began again to call her in her own mind, and perhaps a brighter period was about to dawn for her.

One duty she readily fulfilled, for a duty it seemed, that was to write an account of this important event to Jack Leyton.

He would be so pleased, for he had been especially anxious she should have women friends, and what

better position could she find than a home with a female relative—no, connection—like Mrs. Dallas?

This letter brought a swift reply. Leyton *was* delighted, in fact overjoyed, to find his friend and pupil was to be so happily relieved from the difficulties of her isolated position. “Mrs. Dallas ought to be a warm friend,” he continued, “now she has found out how she has misjudged you, for she certainly was a bitter foe as far as I can gather. Pray let me know where you are to be found, as I should like to see you, and make your aunt’s acquaintance when I return to town.”

To her good friend Mrs. Keene Myra explained the new condition of things by word of mouth, and gladly received the congratulations of the worthy couple.

“It is a pity Mrs. Dallas didn’t speak out straight when she began to think you had made mischief,” said Mrs. Keene reflectively. “If she had just given you a piece of her mind you might have cleared yourself, but it’s not often her sort goes quite straight.”

“What *do* you mean?” cried Myra. “You must not say anything against my aunt now that we are

going to be friends, and she wishes to be good to me!"

"Well I'm not blaming her, Miss Myra! only you know it's harder for one of them half-castes to act square than for a real thorough Englishwoman."

"Half-caste? *was* she a half-caste?"

"Yes, missee. Her father was an Englishman and her mother a native woman. You may see it in her finger-nails. I've heard her ladyship speak of her when she told me as how the colonel had brought you back from Munich."

"Oh! well, I don't want to know anything about her now she is kind. I used to hate her; but that was because she wounded me. Now I know she thought me an ungrateful wretch I can forgive her, and I feel all the happier."

"You are right, Miss Myra, only don't offend her, or go too much against her—she might change round again."

"Pray do not prophesy evil!" cried Myra. "Of course I shall like her and be nice to her."

"All I am afraid of is, she will not let you come and see us! She is rather high and haughty, and when first I went to ask to see you she spoke to

me as if I were dirt ; so maybe she won't like you to come."

" Oh ! but I will—I am not going to be a slave."

" I hope not, my dear ! but we'll see !"

Mrs. Dallas was an energetic woman. She had undertaken to assist Mrs. Fairchild in her search for a governess to fill Myra's place, and she did not let the grass grow under her feet. She haunted scholastic offices, answered advertisements, wrote, and rambled from post to pillar till she discovered the desired article early in December. The question of the Christmas vacation arose, and finally it was arranged that Myra should be emancipated a week before that festival, and her successor come in a week after. So Myra bade adieu to Ruby Lodge, not without kindly regret.

It was indeed strange to be installed in her aunt's home as a favoured inmate—to be not only warmly received, but to be treated with marked consideration.

" I have only a tiny bedroom to give you, dear !" said Mrs. Dallas, as she led the way upstairs, after Myra's one trunk, which was being carried by a sixpenny volunteer, under the inspection of Mrs.

Dwyer. "But by-and-bye, when I know better what I can venture to do, you shall have more comfortable quarters."

"It is quite as good as I want, and it is larger than the one I had at Ruby Lodge."

"When you unpack your things I shall put away your box—that will give you more room. Lionel desired me to say he hopes you will excuse him, but he is obliged to dine out to-day."

"Oh! of course, he need not mind me. It would never do to stand on ceremony with a member of the family as I am to be."

"It is very nice and sensible of you, dear, to say so. I always thought you a sensible girl. I hope now that you are with me Lionel will stay more at home. He is too fond of society; perhaps as he is out, we might do with tea and eggs—we women care so little what we eat."

"Eggs and tea are delicious," exclaimed Myra joyously, charmed with the warmth and kindness of her aunt's manner.

"A dinner of herbs where love is is not to be despised," said Mrs. Dallas with a gentle smile. "I will leave you to unpack. You have really very

pretty hair, Myra," as she removed her hat. "We will have our tea-dinner at six; by-the-way, Lionel is dining with great friends of mine—Lady Shirland and her daughter, or rather, step-daughter—Miss Dorothea Browne, a very charming girl, with a large fortune. I think my dear boy is greatly taken with her, nor is she averse to him. I am sure you believe I am not mercenary, but Lionel has no fortune, and if a nice amiable girl *with* one is willing to marry him, why, it would be a great relief to my mind."

"I suppose so! I heard of Lady Shirland some little time ago from a gentleman who knows her very well."

"A gentleman!" repeated Mrs. Dallas, a hundred notes of admiration and interrogation in her voice.

"Yes, an old friend of my father's," returned Myra with happy unconsciousness, taking off her jacket and laying it on the bed—"Mr. Leyton. He used to study with my father when I was a little girl of thirteen or fourteen. We met by accident, and he very kindly came to see me, and gave me a lesson or two in sketching. I daresay he will call here when he comes back to town."

“But, good heavens! how does he know where to find you?”

“I wrote and told him. He was so distressed about my not having any home, that I told him how good you were to me.”

“Ha! and asked him to call?” said Mrs. Dallas, looking into her eyes as though she would read her soul.

“Oh! no. I should not think of troubling him, but he asked *me* to let him know where I should be.”

Mrs. Dallas looked down for a moment in silence, and then said in a slightly constrained tone—

“Of course, dear, I shall be pleased to see any friend of yours; but young ladies rarely make the acquaintance of gentlemen without a proper introduction.”

“Well, Jack Leyton was introduced to me by my poor dear father!” returned Myra, with a sigh and a smile.

“True!” said Mrs. Dallas amiably. “You will come down, dear, when you are ready;” and she left the room.

The evening passed pleasantly. Mrs. Dallas asked Myra to play, and seemed to enjoy the

music. She was not in the habit of reading, nor did she care for needlework, unless, indeed, she fabricated a lace fichu, or trimmed a dainty bonnet, and her taste, though tending to brilliant colours, was good. Dress and jewels were her idols; she also loved luxury in every shape, though quite capable of abstemiousness in all directions were she obliged to pay for the luxury herself. She had a certain sense of enjoyment in music, and would sit and dream while Myra's fingers strayed over the keys.

That first evening Lionel did not appear, and Myra's first interview with him took place at breakfast next morning. Mrs. Dallas always had her coffee in bed, so for half an hour Lionel and Myra were *tête-à-tête*, and she found him unusually agreeable. He expressed his pleasure at finding that she and his mother had, as he expressed it, "made it up," and hoped that he and his mother's guest would get on together, "in a brotherly and sisterly fashion, eh, Myra?" he added, in a rather mocking tone.

"Yes, Lionel! there is no reason why we should not," returned Myra good-humouredly. "I am sure you could be a very nice brother!"

“At any rate I’ll try,” said Lionel, “to be worthy of my sister.”

So Myra settled down as a member of the family, and the first strangeness soon wore off. She was quickly conscious that she was of real use to Mrs. Dallas, and was deeply gratified to find it so, while the conviction that her position grew more and more secure lulled the vague uneasiness which at first disturbed her.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE THIN END OF THE WEDGE.

CHRISTMAS had come and gone. It had been a very dull season in Melford Road. Mrs. Dallas was much depressed, and went frequently to afternoon service, whither Myra always accompanied her. It was curious how Myra gradually found it impossible to do anything or go anywhere without her aunt, who seemed quite unable to do without her, unless indeed Lionel accompanied Myra anywhere. Then Mrs. Dallas was quite content to stay at home and alone. Lionel stayed at home much more himself than he did at first, and appeared to take great pleasure in singing to Myra's accompaniment. He had a rich tenor voice, and she liked to hear him, while Mrs. Dallas declared that her dear children cheered and sustained her.

Towards the middle of January Lady Shirland

and Miss Browne returned from some country visits and settled themselves in their comfortable, handsome house, where the former hoped her whimsical step-daughter would let her rest for awhile. The weather was bright and frosty, and skaters began to hope that another twenty-four hours would make the ice on the Serpentine strong enough for their exhilarating exercise. Miss Browne had returned from a busy afternoon of shopping and visiting, and Lady Shirland, who had a slight cold, had prudently kept indoors, and was presiding over a tea-table daintily set out with silver and china, scones, and thin bread-and-butter. She was a stately, portly woman of middle height, with white hair and a good complexion, keen grey eyes, and a wide smiling mouth that seemed as if it could appreciate good things. Miss Browne had just taken off her hat, showing a goodly supply of light yellow hair, very dry and dull; a coat trimmed with rich fur had been thrown off, over a chair near the window. She was very pale, and rather above the average height; very thin and angular, but admirably dressed, presenting indeed a perfect dressmaker's figure. The grate glowed with a splendid fire. The room was richly

and luxuriously furnished, and sweet with the perfume of hothouse flowers.

"The wind is decidedly north-east," said Miss Browne, in a slow, drawling, but carefully modulated voice, as she stirred her tea. "I was quite frightened as I came out from Howell and James's. The carriage was a little way off, and I felt it piercing my chest like a spear. I trust I may be spared bronchitis *this* year."

"Pray don't talk about it," cried Lady Shirland hastily. "It would never do. I fancy we are going to have a rather good season! There is a note from dear Lady Betty Lorimer; she is going to give a series of Cinderella dances in February, and quite counts on you. They are to be fancy dress affairs, and I believe they are to end in cotillons or some Russian dance!"

"Oh! indeed! Those early things are generally good before the season is too crowded. Have you had anyone to-day?"

"Only Mrs. Dacre and our vicar, who is in town for a few days. I asked him to dinner to-morrow."

"How tiresome! He is wofully stupid, and curiously obstinate!"

"I really don't find him stupid, Dorothea. He has plenty of plain common sense!"

"But it is so plain, mamma!" returned Miss Browne, who was just a little behind the age, and thought "mother" vulgar. Lady Shirland's reply was prevented by the announcement of "Mr. Leyton, my lady!"

Dorothea put down her cup and pressed her hand on the spot supposed to cover the human heart, as Leyton entered, in very much the same kind of careless get-up he wore when he met Myra.

"My dear Jack!" exclaimed Lady Shirland, who was a genial, easy-going creature, and could never keep strictly between the lines of severely correct manner, as she rose and shook hands with him cordially, "I am delighted to see you! Where on earth have you been? It must be two years since you vanished."

"Just eighteen months, mamma, dear," said Dorothea, smiling sweetly upon him, "since we met in Paris."

"Ah! Miss Browne! I trust you are all the better for your winter in the south! You look as you had wrestled successfully with the bronchitis fiend.

"Thank you! I *am* better, and you know that a moment's respite is enough for my buoyant spirit to recover itself."

"Now sit down. Have a cup of tea, and tell me what you are doing."

"Not much," returned Leyton, drawing his chair near the table. "I am working here—I have a studio up in north-west district, and I am going to exhibit my Egyptian sketches as soon as the days lengthen a little."

"Oh! don't wait for that! they will look as well by gas-light, and in another month there will be such dozens of exhibitions! And do you mean to say you have been all this time in town and never called?"

"I scarcely liked to do so. I have lived so long out of the world, the polite world, that I scarcely dared to present myself;" and he laughed—a pleasant sensible laugh.

"Oh, Mr. Leyton!" exclaimed Dorothea with a side-long glance.

"What nonsense!" added her step-mother. "Then," she continued, "you have no news?"

"Nothing whatever. I come to you for that

commodity. Tell me, have you seen anything of Wardlaw lately?"

"No!" replied Lady Shirland, "not since last season; but I fancy he must be in town now."

"I want a talk with him very much," said Leyton. "Was he not a friend of Colonel Dallas, and of his brother the artist, who drifted out of society?"

"Very likely. Mr. Wardlaw knows everyone. We know the widow of Colonel Dallas—one of the most charming women possible—so soft, so refined. Isn't she, Dorothea?"

"Oh, yes! with great dark oriental eyes that make you think of Lalla Rookh."

"You know it was so unlucky poor Colonel Dallas died just a week before that rich old George Dallas. Now, if he had outlived him a week, though there would have been no time to make a will, and the fortune would have gone to Cecil Forrester probably all the same, the widow would have had her thirds, and a very handsome income it would have given her. Now she is comparatively poor."

"What sort of a fellow is Cecil Forrester?" asked Leyton.

“An ordinary well-bred young man. I hardly know him. Have you never met him?”

“No!” said Leyton. “Why I ask about him is this. I knew Frederic Dallas well, and studied with him long ago at Munich, at least, I shared his studio. He was as good a fellow as ever lived—simple as a child. His daughter is utterly unprovided for. I wonder, if things were properly represented to Forrester, would he settle some fraction of his wealth upon her? You know if——”

“Yes—yes,” exclaimed Lady Shirland, hastily glancing at Dorothea, who was looking down in a maidenly manner, and feeding a beautiful Persian cat with a silver bell round its neck. “We need not discuss that now! I don’t suppose Captain Forrester would do anything of the kind; no man ever likes to part with his money! besides, this girl does not want it. Mrs. Dallas has most kindly, though perhaps not too wisely, adopted her.”

“Will that be permanent? Mrs. Dallas is, you say, not very well off herself. The whole maintenance of Miss Dallas ought not to be thrown on her?”

“Do they call her Miss Dallas?” asked Lady

Shirland. "I am sure, Jack, I should not meddle if I were you."

"I should like the matter brought to Forrester's notice, however," persisted Leyton. "Isn't Wardlaw a great chum of his?"

"He was his guardian, I think," said Dorothea. "You might ask him. It would be very unkind of Captain Forrester not to give her an allowance or annuity or something. It must be such a pleasure to help anyone," she continued with girlish good-nature. "I was always sorry for that poor little thing, for I am quite sure she used not to get on with Mrs. Dallas."

"Well, you know, Mrs. Dallas in one of her letters to me said there had been some misunderstanding, and that she feared she had not been quite kind to her niece," remarked Lady Shirland.

"Very sweet of her to confess it," added Dorothea.

"I am sure," began Leyton, with some hesitation, "you will excuse me if I venture to recommend my old friend's daughter to you both. The notice of a young lady like Miss Browne would be of immense advantage to her, for after all Mrs. Dallas

must be rather too much her senior to be a thoroughly sympathetic companion. She was such an idol with her father, such a bright gentle child when I remember her, that I am awfully sorry to think of her helpless condition."

"Poor child!" cried Dorothea with enthusiasm. "I shall certainly do all I can for her;" and she clasped her somewhat large bony hands together and looked up into Leyton's eyes in a thrilling manner.

"I felt sure of *your* kindness," said Leyton, returning the glance with interest.

"Of course," resumed Lady Shirland, "we should be most happy to be of use to any friend of yours, Jack, but now that Mrs. Dallas has adopted your young *protégée* I don't think she is much to be pitied. I should like you to meet Mrs. Dallas. Come and dine with us next week. I will persuade her to fix a day, and——"

"My dear Lady Shirland, I have not dined out for years, and almost forget how to behave myself. I am quite useless for social purposes. It is an act of infinite grace that you permit me the *entrée* of your drawing-room. I am hardly fit to appear

before Miss Browne, with whom alas ! I cannot claim the privileges of an old friend."

"Oh, indeed, Mr. Leyton, I am very pleased to see you ! I am so struck by your kindness to Miss Dallas. You really must come, if it were only to induce her to accept me for a friend !" cried Dorothea bashfully.

"No one could be so persuasive as yourself," began Leyton, when he was interrupted by the opening of the door and the solemn announcement, "Mrs. Dallas !"

The entry of that lady in her best and most dignified style, and her deep mourning, was most effective. Lady Shirland held out both hands, and Dorothea quite ran to meet and embrace her.

"Now this is really nice and good of you," said the former. "I had despaired of ever seeing you within our walls again."

"Dear Mrs. Dallas, I am so glad you have summoned strength to look on the world once more !" whispered Dorothea audibly, as she kissed her.

"Do sit down near the fire. Dorothea, get a screen and a footstool. How did you come ? Walked ? Oh ! you must be very tired."

"No, indeed, dear Lady Shirland. Since I have had my niece with me I have walked more than I ever did in my life before;" and she turned her great lustrous eyes on Leyton.

"Mr. Leyton, a relative of mine," said Lady Shirland with a wave of her hand. "Mr. Leyton, Mrs. Dallas."

Mrs. Dallas bowed gracefully, and took a cup of tea presented by Dorothea, while Leyton handed her the scones.

"This is my first visit," resumed Mrs. Dallas in sugary tones. "I was so vexed to be out when you called that I determined to conquer my own morbid aversion to movement, and indulge myself by a visit to you!"

"The first of many, I hope," cried Dorothea, dropping carefully on a footstool at her feet, from whence she could look up with equal effect into Leyton's eyes, or those of Mrs. Dallas.

"Do you know we were just talking of you and of your niece!" resumed the countess. "Mr. Leyton knew her as a child in Munich, and is deeply interested in her."

"Ah! yes! I have heard Myra speak of you,

Mr. Leyton," said Mrs. Dallas with a slow smile. "She is very grateful for your kind notice. She will be sorry not to have been at home when you called just now. She has gone with my son to see if there is any skating on the Serpentine; her life with me is rather dull, and the young need the young for cheering companionship."

"She is a fortunate girl to have such a friend in you!" exclaimed Lady Shirland. "Do you know, Jack, I should like you to tell Mrs. Dallas your idea about Captain Forrester. You have no objection, I suppose?"

"Of course not!" said Leyton. "What the devil made her suggest it?" he thought, and proceeded with a polite apology for interfering in what did not concern him, to explain his views respecting an application to the heir of George Dallas's wealth.

"How very good of you," said the handsome widow with a melting glance. "To think of undertaking so disagreeable a task is indeed a proof of friendship! But, my dear Mr. Leyton, I will not impose it upon you. I cannot agree to any application being made to Captain Forrester. He has never made the smallest advance to me — never

acknowledged me in any way. And though he *must* know what a loss to me *his* gain must be, it has never occurred to him to make it up. I am thankful to think I can do without his aid, and I will never stoop to ask it for my dear husband's niece."

"Well, Mrs. Dallas, that may be very high-minded," said Jack, "but I doubt if it is wise. You do not know how matters may turn out, and Myra may be a drag on you one of these days. However, you know your affairs best! Now, Lady Shirland, I must say good-bye. I've been paying you a visitation."

"By no means, Jack. Before you go I want dear Mrs. Dallas to fix a day to dine here and bring her son (she has a charming son) and her newly-adopted daughter and yourself. Not another soul except Dorothea's guardian! Now do not refuse me, dear. It will do you good, and six months' complete seclusion is enough, I am sure, to prove your respect even for so excellent a man as the poor colonel."

A good deal of pleading followed. But Mrs. Dallas was gently firm. She would not and could

not dine out even with her beloved Lady Shirland and Dorothea yet awhile! So Jack Leyton took leave of the ladies, and the project fell through.

"If you will not dine with us," said Miss Browne coquettishly, as she bade him good-bye, "we will go and have tea with you. I do want to see your studio; I love pictures."

"You are very good!" said Leyton. "I shall be delighted and honoured; but mine is a bare barrack of a place, and horribly out of the way; but I'll write and ask you to fix a day"—and with a parting bow he vanished.

"What an interesting face!" murmured Mrs. Dallas, looking after him.

"Yes! hasn't he?" echoed Dorothea. "We used to see him often when I was a mere school-girl, then he disappeared. I am afraid he has not been very steady."

"Ah! poor fellow!" ejaculated Mrs. Dallas in a reproachful tone.

"Why do you say so?" asked Dorothea.

"Because it is easy to see what has disturbed his life! *You* ought not to be too hard upon him, dear Dorothea!"

“Oh, Mrs. Dallas! do not frighten me with such suggestions,” exclaimed Dorothea in the most approved shrinking tone. “I never dreamed of such a thing. I am sure you are quite mistaken!”

“Well, my love, I will not persist, but I am not often mistaken, and time will show. Pray forgive me, Lady Shirland, I hope I am not indiscreet.”

“Oh! dear no! I have given up troubling about indiscretion,” returned the countess impatiently. “Jack Leyton used to be a very good fellow, and is still, I believe. Something went wrong with him, and I lost sight of him for some years. We were all awfully vexed when he left the army. His people were distant relations of mine, and friends into the bargain. We must try and get him to come back into society.”

“No one could do more for him than yourself, dear Lady Shirland!” said Mrs. Dallas in her most caressing manner. “I am sorry I did not ask him to call on *me*, though an obscure widow like myself can be of little or no use socially.”

“A woman with the power to charm is always of use,” returned Lady Shirland. “Shall I tell him you would be happy to see him?”

"Pray do! I should be very pleased."

"And, dear Mrs. Dallas, do let your niece come and see me. I have never met her, and I should like to be of use to her if I could!" cried Dorothea. "Young people can get on together so easily."

"How sweet of you to think of her! I fear she might bore you, she is a shy, unformed creature, well disposed, but not very bright."

"How has she grown up as to looks? I saw her once, about two years ago, when I thought her rather plain," said Lady Shirland.

"She has improved, but one could not call her pretty."

"Poor little thing! I quite long to know her," said Dorothea ardently. "I shall call to-morrow—no, not to-morrow, the day after, before luncheon, if I may, Mrs. Dallas?"

"If you may! If you will be so good, dear! Now I must leave you. It is late, and those children will be looking for me."

"Let me send Thomas with you; it is so unpleasant to walk in the dusk."

"You forget, Lady Shirland, that I am—I must

be—accustomed to take care of myself. I will not trouble Thomas.”

“I will come down with you,” said Dorothea.

“Pray do not trouble——” Mrs. Dallas was beginning when she caught a glance from the young lady which cut short her remonstrance.

“Good-bye, dear Lady Shirland. I am so glad I forced myself to come here to-day. You have quite cheered me !”

“Then pray come soon again, and you *must* make up your mind to dine with us. It is high time you came out of your shell. Good-bye !”

“I am delighted to have a chance of speaking to you once more !” said Miss Browne in a half-whisper, as they descended the stairs. “I have a hundred and one things to tell you ; you can advise me, for you are almost the only creature who understands me, and my peculiar position.” Mrs. Dallas pressed her hand. “You are so observant ! *you* noticed something peculiar in Mr. Leyton’s manner ?”

“I should be blind if I had not,” returned Mrs. Dallas, smiling sweetly and significantly.

“Ah !” a long drawn “ah.” “It is an old, old

story! But I will come and have a nice long talk with you!"

"Do, my love!" They shook hands and parted. The handsome widow went away towards home with her swift-gliding step, murmuring some sacrilegious syllables which sounded like "Tiresome idiot!"

When Mrs. Dallas reached home she found the lamp in her pretty drawing-room alight and the fire burning brightly.

Lionel was walking to and fro with a look of annoyance on his dark face, and Myra still in her outdoor attire, holding Leyton's card—a small bit of pasteboard on which he had written his name—and gazing at it with suspiciously moist eyes.

"I did not expect you would be back so soon," said Mrs. Dallas, taking off her warm cloak and looking from one to the other.

"Oh! Mrs. Dallas!" cried Myra, who could not all at once get back into her old habit of calling her aunt, "Mr. Leyton has been here. I *am* so sorry to have missed him!"

"I believe you are half crying about it!" said Lionel with evident pique. "Who on earth is this Leyton?"

"I have just told you!" returned Myra impatiently. "The only old friend I have in the world; and had you been snatched away from everyone and everything you loved, as I was, you would be as glad to see a friend you knew in the happy days as I am."

"No doubt," interposed Mrs. Dallas with smiling eyes, "as you will be glad to see Lionel in some future time. However, you have not lost your old friend, Myra. I met him just now at Lady Shirland's, and I have asked him to call again. He seems an interesting man."

"Oh, thank you, Aunt Dallas! He is very nice and good, and such a clever artist. You would like to see his studio!"

"No doubt, my dear. Now go and take off your things, dinner will soon be ready." Myra smiled and disappeared.

"What do you mean by encouraging her whim for this beggarly artist," said Lionel to his mother with savage impatience.

"Would you be so dense as to fan the incipient flame by opposition? I am ashamed that a son of mine should be so dull. Pray observe my play

and follow suit. I am quite aware this Leyton is a man to be avoided, but dexterously, not with brutal frank avoidance; whatever the barrier we raise between them, *he* must seem to be the builder. I thought I had made you understand the importance of patience in this case."

"Yes, yes, I know! you are clever and cool and tenacious, but you haven't to fight with the fever I have to master. Ever since I first met Myra I have wanted her. First, I liked to tease and anger her; then when she refused to kiss and be friends, and grew indifferent to my teasing or pleasing, I came partly to dislike and partly to love her. A kind word or two sets me wild with delight. Now, since you have consented to overlook everything for the sake of my happiness, I begrudge the time that is lost in these slow approaches. She does not know I want her for my wife; she probably thinks I am only amusing myself. When she finds I wish to marry her, to give her the permanent protection of my name, she will learn to love me. She must, she shall, and I will have no man come between us."

"Do you think I will not guard her for you?" said Mrs. Dallas, with a quick flash of resolution in

her eyes. "You little know me. But your precipitancy will only delay your happiness; be guided by me."

"I will be guided by you if you tell me your motives. You have been a generous mother to me, but I don't think you are disposed to general benevolence."

He paused. Mother and son stood looking into each other's eyes for a second.

"Yes, Lionel. I will tell you everything, but not now; this evening, later, when we are alone. Meantime be as brotherly as you can. I do not quite understand Myra, but I feel that her nature is cold compared to ours, and the fire you would kindle in her must be most carefully, most judiciously nursed before it will catch alight. There, go! dinner will be ready directly."

That meal passed pleasantly. At first Lionel was somewhat silent. Mrs. Dallas talked easily, and he gradually chimed in. His mother gave him an imaginary message from Miss Browne, about going to see some new play, and then added—

"You might take Myra to see the pantomime. I don't suppose she was ever at one. There is no reason why you should not go."

"I shall be very happy," returned Lionel. "But I fancy Myra would enjoy an opera more."

"I should enjoy anything in a theatre!" exclaimed Myra.

"I have some engagements next week," proceeded Lionel, "but I will see about places, as Myra would like to go."

"Thank you!" said Myra; and the conversation turned to another channel.

"I don't feel up to anything to-night," said Lionel, throwing himself into a chair when he joined his mother and Myra after dinner. "I have a curious sense of exhaustion, as if I had been engaged in some struggle and had had the worst of it. Will you soothe my weary spirit by the concord of sweet sounds, Myra? Sing the *Schlummerlied* I like so much."

"Oh, yes," cried Myra readily; and for some time she played or sung what Lionel asked, while Mrs. Dallas sat in profound silence working an interminable piece of crochet.

"If you do not want me to-morrow," said Myra, stopping rather abruptly and turning round on the piano-stool, addressing Mrs. Dallas, "I think I shall

go and see Mrs. Keene. I have only been able to call there once since I came here, when she was out."

"It happens I do want you, Myra! I had planned to do some shopping in Regent Street, and ever since my sad loss I am subject to attacks of dizziness, so I do not like being quite alone."

"Very well," returned Myra, "of course I shall go with you." There was a moment's pause, then Myra resumed, "I will write a letter to Mrs. Keene, and say I will come next week, but I stupidly forgot to get any stamps to-day."

"Do not mind that," said Lionel. "I shall be going out directly to smoke a cheroot, and I'll post it for you."

"Thank you very much. I will write it at once."

She left the room for that purpose, and silence reigned till her return, when Lionel took the note, and looking to the supply of his cigar-case, sallied forth.

Soon after Mrs. Dallas said in her kindest tones—

"You are very pale, Myra. You had better go to bed early, my love."

Myra was nothing loth. Mrs. Dallas did not amuse or interest her, so asking leave to take a book,

and receiving a smiling injunction not to set the house on fire, she said good-night.

Mrs. Dallas continued to weave the meshes of her crochet, thinking deeply the while, an expression of satisfaction dwelling on her handsome face. Presently she rose to add a log of wood to the already excellent fire. As she resumed her seat her son re-entered.

"Gone?" he asked, looking round.

"Yes; I sent her to bed. She is really not difficult to manage."

"No, so far! It is a fine clear night, but very cold. I hate winter."

Lionel took his stand on the hearthrug as he spoke, and drawing Myra's note from his pocket handed it to his mother.

She very calmly opened and read it.

"A very harmless production," she said, "and highly complimentary to the dear aunt. Nevertheless, these communications must be cut off;" and throwing the note on the fire she held it down with the poker till it was completely consumed.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE TOILS.

DOROTHEA BROWNE lost no time in fulfilling her promise to Leyton. The day but one after his visit she drove up in a hansom before luncheon to Mrs. Dallas's door, and asked if that lady and Miss Dallas were at home.

The visit was so unexpected at this hour that no instructions had been given, and Mrs. Dallas, lounging over the morning paper in a decidedly grubby, grey dressing-gown, her abundant but straight black hair screwed up with cunningly-devised pins, to produce the "natural" wave which so greatly enhanced its beauty, beat a rapid retreat, when the front door visitors' bell announced an invader.

Myra was, therefore, left alone to receive the effusive spinster, and for a moment felt rather awed, as Lady Shirland and her step-daughter had always been represented to her as persons of the highest

distinction and most refined taste ; but the first few words put her at ease, while she gazed with some surprise at the towy hair, marked eyebrows, and ultra-fashionable morning “get up” of her visitor.

“I presume you are Miss Dallas,” began Dorothea with a fascinating smile, her head a little on one side, and holding out a carefully gloved hand. “My visit is really more to you than to dear Mrs. Dallas. I am so pleased to make your acquaintance. We have heard so much about you !”

“There cannot be much to hear about me ! You are very good,” said Myra, as Miss Browne sank on the sofa.

“Don’t be too sure ! You are *l’enfant gâtée* of this house.” Miss Browne largely interlarded her conversation with French phrases, which shall be translated. “Then an old friend of yours and of mine, Mr. Leyton, was talking of you the last day he called. I believe you knew him abroad ?”

“Oh, yes, he was a great friend of my father’s, and was so good to me always !” cried Myra, colouring vividly, she knew not why. “It was very kind of him to mention me.” Dorothea looked at her for an instant with half-closed eyes.

"He asked my mother and myself to visit his studio. I daresay you would like to come too?"

"Yes, very much; but I have seen it. He has some delightful pictures; there is an autumn landscape, and a group of Orientals in Cairo reading the newspaper, that are quite charming!"

"Oh! indeed! I suppose you are half an artist yourself?"

Myra shook her head. "Barely a quarter," she said smiling.

"You really ought to study," continued Miss Browne. "There are admirable schools in London. There's the Slade—really wonderful—and so cheap!"

"Yes!" returned Myra somewhat hopelessly.

"Now, my dear Miss Dallas," continued Dorothea, "you must help me to persuade your aunt to come to us; just a quiet little dinner and music—you play? I so want a friend who will play and sing with me! for I am rather lonely, though my mother is a charming person; but youth needs youth, doesn't it, dear? by-the-way, you must find young Mr. Ashby a nice companion."

"Oh yes, very nice," said Myra vaguely.

"Yes, I should think so. Oh! dear Mrs. Dallas,"

as that lady, renovated and decorated, entered the room, "we are just talking of your son! Miss Dallas has been telling me what a delightful companion he is."

At this startling statement Myra, remembering certain snubbings in former days, looked rather uneasily at her aunt. A bland smile, however, overspread her face.

"Oh! Lionel and Myra are very good friends," she said; "they are like brother and sister."

"Brother and sister! like Paul et Virginie, I imagine," cried Dorothea with a significant nod and smile.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Dallas, and added with a sigh, "they are both very dear to me!"

"You have such a warm, generous heart!" exclaimed Miss Browne effusively, "*that* is why I have so much comfort in confiding my little troubles to you."

"I feel always flattered by your trust! Myra, my dear, I left a paper on the dining-room table which I want copied—will you kindly do it for me?"

"Oh! yes, of course," and Myra left the room feeling she was dismissed.

“Poor little thing!” cried Dorothea looking after her. “She is very sweet, but I really thought she was better looking! she is so colourless and unfashioned.”

“Yes, a simple child of nature, but I trust she will improve.”

“Pray, have you seen Mr. Leyton since?” asked Miss Browne.

“Oh no! He only called here from a sense of duty to his old friend’s daughter. I don’t suppose he will come again for weeks.”

“Perhaps not! but *do* you know, dear Mrs. Dallas, that she has been to his studio?”

“She? who?”

“Why, your niece—Myra Dallas, of course. She is a simple child, but I thought I would tell you.”

“Thank you, dear Dorothea. It was slightly imprudent, and I shall see that it does not occur again.”

“It might be better not, and, sympathising as I do with another young creature, I thought I would mention that when I first named him, she blushed celestial rosy red, love’s proper hue!”

Mrs. Dallas darted one keen look at her interlo-

ector, then with a frank laugh exclaimed, "Poor child. I trust she does not waste sentiment in that direction. We know it would be wasted! Nevertheless, the vanity and impressibility of men is such, that the fewer opportunities Mr. Leyton has of seeing the effect his presence produces, the better for all concerned. But tell me, how is it that, with the evident attraction which exists between you, you and Mr. Leyton have drifted so far apart?"

"Ah! dearest Mrs. Dallas, it is a long and complicated story, and would try your patience!"

"By no means, Dorothea! Friendship must be cold indeed if it is not interested in a woman's most important story."

"You know," began Miss Browne, thus encouraged, "Jack Leyton's mother and mine — I mean Lady Shirland—were first cousins; and before he went to India he used to come to our house. Dearest papa was alive then, and Jack used to play with me and tease me, and in short I did not understand him. Then some years after he returned from India, and all his people quarrelled with him because he gave up the army and would be an artist. He used to be a good deal at our house, but Lady

Shirland did not encourage him, she thought he was no match for me. I well remember his turning over my music often, and saying in a tone I can never forget, ‘Pray sing, “Oh, let me hear that angel-voice once more!”’ It is a simple ballad, full of feeling; of course he alluded to the singing lessons I had been taking when he was last in England. Another time, when young Lord de Crespigny was paying me marked attention, he sighed deeply, and observed, ‘Lucky dog! I suppose *he* would not be sent boneless away!’ alluding, of course, to the canine taste for bones. On one occasion he gave me a beautiful pin for my hat, and most unfortunately I lost it a few days after. I cannot—no, it is impossible to convey the despairing and reproachful expression in his eyes when I confessed the loss!”

“Ah! indeed, poor fellow!” exclaimed Mrs. Dallas in sympathetic tones.

“Now that we have met again,” resumed Dorothea, “there is the same yearning tenderness in his eyes, the same thrilling pathos in his voice. I know it is the knowledge of my fatal fortune that holds him back, and my mother fears to encourage him; conventional scruples blind her to my happiness,

and so, dear Mrs. Dallas, I drift and drift. If any brave friend could hint to him the true state of affairs, and give him back life and joy and——”

“Perhaps it might be managed,” interrupted Mrs. Dallas.

“Another reason which prompts me to confide in you, dear,” resumed Dorothea Browne, “is regard for your delightful son. He seemed a little, just a little, *épris*—a youthful fancy merely,” coquettishly, “and I am myself perhaps a little giddy and thoughtless, and amused with his artless admiration—but I would not wound him or you for worlds! You will warn him; I have no heart to give; and let me retain your regard, for indeed I feel that I am at a crisis of my life!”

“Courage, my dear girl!” cried Mrs. Dallas, swallowing a yawn, “and trust to me; do not waste a thought on poor Lionel, he is too presumptuous; but take my advice, be prudent how you allow Myra and Mr. Leyton to meet. Doubtful, perhaps despairing about *you*, there is no knowing how his thirsty spirit might seek to quench its longings.”

“How wise you are!” cried Dorothea enthusiastically. “I shall be guided by you in all things, and

perhaps your delicate tact will suggest some means of giving my naughty difficult old playfellow a useful hint?"

"Trust me!" said Mrs. Dallas significantly.

"Now, suppose you let Miss Dallas return to luncheon with me. We can have a little music and a drive, and I shall bring her back to tea. My mother is gone to luncheon with the poor old Duchess of Kensington, who has been so ill, so we girls will have the house to ourselves!"

"Certainly, as you are so very kind! I will go and tell her to dress."

"Yes, if she likes to come."

"Of course she will like to come."

With a smile and a nod Mrs. Dallas left the room and sought her niece.

Myra was sitting by the half-expired fire, looking sad and bored.

"Oh, aunt!" she exclaimed, as that lady entered, "I could not find any paper to copy."

"No, of course not," replied Mrs. Dallas with a laugh. "I only sent you out of the way while Miss Browne told me her secrets."

"I thought so, and I stayed away!"

"Wise girl," said her aunt. "Now she wants you to go back to lunch with her, so go and put on your things. She will be a nice acquaintance."

"I am afraid my gloves are very shabby."

"Well, dear, buy another pair while you are out with Miss Browne; it will be something to do. Have you any money?"

"Oh, enough for that—" and Myra went off to dress, glad of a little change. She had now been more than two months an inmate of her aunt's house, and she had begun to find that the want of work, or regular occupation, made life terribly dull.

The change to Miss Browne's company did not, however, prove so exhilarating as she expected.

That lady talked a good deal in a very lively manner; but her subject never varied, it was always Miss Browne.

According to her own account, she was a universal genius. She wrote short stories; composed lovely lyrics, which she set to music; spoke many tongues, and had a nice taste for art—only not quite so marked as her genius for music.

Myra found no room for more than monosyllabic notes of admiration, sincere enough at

first; but, before the day was over, vague doubts began to form themselves as to the possibility of such gifts being enshrined in the fuzzy-headed, powdered, over-dressed, simpering, self-conscious, elderly young lady who giggled and posed with affected grace before her. Among the many branches of her all-pervading subject—self—Miss Browne enlarged on the impression she had made on the too susceptible heart of that interesting young man Mr. Ashby, whose superb eyes Dorothea thought worthy her notice. “He must have the blood of some Indian prince in his veins, Myra—you *will* let me call you Myra, will you not?”

“Yes, certainly, if you wish it, Miss Browne.”

“Thank you, dear—but you agree with me there is something of the oriental prince about Lionel Ashby?”

“I never saw an oriental prince,” returned Myra thoughtfully. “Lionel can be very nice, but I cannot see anything princely about him.”

“Ah! that is because you have not much imagination, Myra. I have, alas! too much. That is partly the reason why I suffer so terribly from nerves and neuralgia,” etc. etc. etc. A long list

of maladies and their treatment followed. From these recitals it was a relief to examine the ornaments, pictures, china, and charming etceteras which embellished Lady Shirland's, or, to be more correct, Miss Browne's residence.

Myra had never seen anything finer than her aunt's drawing-room, which, but for some really good oriental hangings and embroideries, were, though effective, of the two-penny-halfpenny order of decoration. She quite revelled in the beautiful things about her.

"You ought to buy Jack Leyton's Cairo picture, it would just fit in there," pointing to a space on the wall in a delightful room which Miss Browne termed her study.

"*Jack* Leyton!" repeated Dorothea uncertainly. "I suppose you were *very* intimate."

"I never heard him called anything but Jack," said Myra dejectedly. "If it is wrong I shall call him Mr. Leyton, but I always *think* of him as Jack."

"And do you often think of him, dear?" insinuatingly.

"Oh, yes, very often; whenever I think of my father, and my home!"

"Well, my dear Myra, *I* think you are very fortunate to have so happy a home as yours, with so kind and charming a woman as Mrs. Dallas."

"I am, indeed!" heartily.

"Now, I am going to give you a task," coquettishly. "Will you try to comfort poor young Ashby for my hard-heartedness; you might be a sweet little comforter if you liked."

"Very well!" returned Myra laughing; "but I think he comforts himself by going out a good deal. He is often away in the evening."

"Indeed!" returned Dorothea in a sharp tone. What she might have added remained unsaid; for the "young creatures" had sat long after their lunch, enjoying the feast of reason and the flow of soul; and Dorothea dearly loved a new listener, so she was greatly surprised by the entrance of her step-mother.

Lady Shirland greeted Myra with kindly courtesy, and then declared she was so exhausted by her efforts to make the dear duchess hear, that she must have a cup of tea at once. This altered the "young creatures'" plans; the carriage was countermanded for an hour; and Dorothea proposed to

test Myra's skill in playing accompaniments, and her victim, though terribly nervous, felt obliged to comply. Then she found that the all-accomplished Dorothea sang wofully out of tune, and Dorothea said her delightful new friend was just a "leetle" deficient in time.

"There is certainly something wrong somewhere," said Lady Shirland rather impatiently. "And, now, my dears, if you have no special plan to be frustrated, I want very much to pay a visit at the other side of Regent's Park; so perhaps the carriage can set Miss Dallas down at home, and return for you and me, Dorothea. You ought to come with me to see Lady Elizabeth."

"Very well," agreed Dorothea, who felt, half unconsciously, that Myra was somehow less earnestly admiring than at the beginning of their interview. So Myra put on her hat, and took her leave, expressing her thanks with graceful shyness for a pleasant day.

"She is really a nice little thing, but quite plain, and rather dull! What do you think of her mamma?"

"Plain! No! Not at all regularly pretty, but

most interesting. And her eyes; did you notice her eyes? They would redeem any face."

"No, not particularly; they seem not exactly suited to her hair."

"Nonsense, Dorothea! She is a sort of girl an artist would go wild about!"

'Do you really think so? Well, unless Mrs. Dallas intends her son to marry her, she ought not to let them be so much together."

"Mrs. Dallas knows her own affairs thoroughly, I imagine."

* * * * *

Next morning was crisp and bright, and Myra looked rather wistfully out into the sunlit street.

"I know you do not care to go out before luncheon, aunt," she said, as Mrs. Dallas came into the dining-room with a large work-basket in her hand. "But have you no errands I could do for you? I *should* enjoy a walk this morning."

"No, dear, I really have not. It may be an old-fashioned prejudice; but I do not like the idea of a young lady—especially a pretty, elegant-looking girl—wandering about alone. I was never permitted

to do it myself, and I will try and take care of you, love."

"I am sure you are very kind; but as I shall probably have to go about by myself later, had I not better get accustomed to do so now?"

"I hope you shall not be obliged, my dear;" and Mrs. Dallas began to take numerous socks from her basket, also a skein of darning-cotton; then she looked at them and sighed.

"I will darn Lionel's socks for you, aunt," cried Myra. "You always look so dreadfully tired over them."

"Thank you, Myra, I know you are glad to help me; really, we must be very careful! The way in which that tiresome Mrs. Dwyer robs and plunders in petty things is too disgraceful." The complainant was fresh from her daily struggle with the landlady regarding the minor supplies which passed through her hands. For Mrs. Dallas expected the largest amount of comfort for the smallest outlay of money; and had, moreover, a haughty and imperious manner of treating those whom she considered a step below her, which had converted her semi-Celtic landlady into a bitter enemy.

"It must be very annoying," said Myra—towards whom, by the way, Mrs. Dwyer was always particularly polite and obliging—and she proceeded to thread her needle and draw a sock on her left hand.

"They will be precious socks to Lionel, if he knows who mended them," resumed Mrs. Dallas.

"Not so precious as if Miss Browne had done them," returned Myra laughing.

"Ah! You are quite mistaken, Myra. Poor Lionel! Dorothea Browne's attentions turned my boy's head a little, but it is quite different now," and she watched her niece's speaking face, while she thought "A healthy breeze of jealousy has set in." Myra darned on in silence.

"Did you buy your gloves yesterday, my love?" asked Mrs. Dallas, after a brief silence.

"No, aunt; I had no opportunity. Lady Shirland wanted the carriage."

"True! Well, if it keeps fine, you and I will do some shopping this afternoon. You shall buy your gloves, and I will get you a new hat and jacket, and one or two little things."

"You are too good and generous!" cried Myra

with moist eyes. "I can go on quite well till spring with what I have."

"No, my love. I wish to treat you like my daughter, and that you should look well. Of course, as I now consider myself your mother, I shall not think of making you that allowance. You must just come to me for everything."

"I ought to be most grateful to you—and I *am*," said Myra, feeling some self-reproach for the sort of regret with which she thought of being without a penny.

"Yes, I am sure of it, Myra—." There was a pause, during which Mrs. Dallas glanced at the "Births, Deaths, and Marriages" in the *Daily Telegraph*.

"Shall I tell you how you may help me infinitely, Myra?"

"Oh, yes? Pray do?"

"Try to keep Lionel at home of an evening. I am afraid he has fallen among a set of men who tempt him to play. He is really good, and has never occasioned me any anxiety; but the best of men are weak. Ask him to stay at home to-night. Say we are dull without him."



"Yes, I will if you wish it," began Myra with evident reluctance.

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. Dallas sadly, "would you hesitate?"

Myra felt herself a monster.

"Oh, no, indeed! aunt. Only you see—Lionel may think—that is—I would not mislead him for the world—I——"

"Do not misunderstand him or me. I shall take care, dear, that there shall be no foolish mistakes. Can you not trust me, Myra?"

"Of course I can!"

"Then do not fail me, dear."

"No, I will not, aunt. And you—you will let Lionel know you asked me, for you remember he used to be a little silly; but now he has seen more, and knows nice clever people like Miss Browne, of course, he will not think much of me," concluded Myra cheerfully.

Mrs. Dallas gazed at her a moment so searchingly that Myra felt as if her great black eyes could extract the inmost secrets of her soul.

"My son's fancy in that direction was of the most passing description, and though—like most

young men—he is passionate and imprudent, he is not quite such a fool as to throw away his heart on a woman who is in love with and, I have every reason to believe, engaged to another,” continued Mrs. Dallas, a happy thought suggesting itself. “Mr. Leyton and Dorothea Browne have been long attached, but there were difficulties in the way. Now I fancy they are nearly, if not altogether, removed.”

Myra was conscious of a sudden, unaccountable thrill of icy pain through her heart as Mrs. Dallas spoke. She could not understand herself. Why should she be vexed or distressed? Miss Browne was kind, and seemed to like her. If she married Jack Leyton, she (Myra) would have two good friends instead of one. But how could such a funny, restless, unnatural kind of woman please Jack, who was so simple and unaffected, not to say abrupt, himself. It seemed in some inexplicable way positively tragical.

“Miss Browne has a great deal of money?” she asked, feeling it imperatively necessary to say something, because Mrs. Dallas was watching her covertly.

“Yes, a large fortune.”

“That will be good for Jack. It is very trying to be poor, especially for a man. Then he will have a nice house, and buy lovely things?”

Somebody else seemed to be saying this while she herself, her real self, had flown away back to the dear old homely Munich studio, and was busy sewing a button on Jack's glove while he stood beside her in all the glory of evening dress, like none other she had ever seen before or since; and yet, after all, only a tolerably good-looking man with an indescribable, distinguished, soldier-like air.

It was suddenly borne in upon her that Jack was terribly changed. He was no longer the sort of prince he once seemed; he had grown rugged and careless; only his quick, kind eyes, his fine carriage remained.

While these ideas—not distinct as here put down, but vaguely painful—swept through her mind, Mrs. Dallas was speaking—

“I am glad, Myra, you have such sensible convictions. Money is of the last importance. I am far from mercenary, but for those I love I dread

poverty more than anything. That is why I am so anxious to make reparation to you for the injustice I have done you. You suffered from poverty too long. Now one of my chief efforts will be to save for you and Lionel; *you* will not find yourself forgotten. Now I have some letters to write; put some coal on, dear, and if you *will* go on with your darning it will be a great relief. I am afraid I am a lazy creature."

"No, indeed, you are not, only you do not care for needlework."

A long silence ensued, during which Myra did not feel able to think clearly; an uncomfortable sense of being watched, that her meditations might be divined, confused her mental operations.

After luncheon Mrs. Dallas sallied forth with Myra, and they spent a cheerful afternoon. Myra was quite alarmed at the readiness with which her aunt spent what seemed to her large sums in replenishing her wardrobe. First, however, Mrs. Dallas let her choose and pay for a pair of gloves.

"What have you left?" she asked with a smile, as Myra put some change in her purse.

"Eighteenpence," replied Myra, laughing.

"What, your all! Well, you will not want much. When you do require a shilling or two, come to me."

Lionel came in that day punctually at dinner time. As soon as that meal was over, he rose, looked at the clock, and drew out his cigarette-case. Myra remembered her promise.

"Don't go out, Lionel," she said, placing herself between him and the door. "Your mother and I are quite dull without you. Stay at home this evening. Let us have some music, and——"

"Do *you* wish me to stay?" interrupted Lionel, his eyes lighting up, his dark cheek reddening.

"Yes, of course I do; don't we, aunt?"

Mrs. Dallas did not speak.

"Ask me to stay for *your* sake, Myra," cried Lionel, drawing nearer and holding out his hand.

Myra sent an appealing glance to his mother, who, unseen by her son, clasped her hands in silent entreaty.

"Very well, Lionel," said Myra, with a good-humoured laugh, but disregarding his outstretched hand. "Stay for my sake, and we shall have *such* a practice."

Lionel hesitated a moment, and then in a low voice murmured—

“I will go or stay, or do whatever you like.”

“Thank you,” returned Myra in the same light tone with which she had pressed him to stay, though her heart beat with undefined fear. “I should like you to sing ‘Some day’” — and she left the room, followed by Lionel and her aunt, who whispered a few earnest words to her son as they mounted the stairs side by side.

Lionel made no further display of feeling which could annoy Myra; and after many songs, and an attempt at a duet, a game of dummy whist to amuse Mrs. Dallas—who loved cards—finished a quiet, sociable evening.

Though Myra made haste to bed, having a short bit of candle (Mrs. Dallas objected to gas in bedrooms, as being a temptation to sit up), she lay long awake, thinking—thinking; at last she made out why the idea of Jack Leyton’s marriage with Miss Browne had sent her heart down into the depths. She felt that Miss Browne was a person whose presence acted on her spirit like the desiccating breeze from some desolate, arid region,

where no rain-drops ever slaked the dry and thirsty soil. It would be impossible to utter a syllable of her own sorrows, memories, or hopes to her; rather would Myra keep them from her knowledge, while the one joy of heart was to open it to her old friend Jack; to tell him every thought, to dwell with him on every sweet or sorrowful memory. If he married Miss Browne, of course, what was told to one would be known by the other; so Jack would be lost as a confidante. Oh, what a loss! That point settled, a more serious one presented itself. She was all but penniless, though she had found an unexpected two-pence-halfpenny in her purse, which raised her capital to one-and-eight-pence halfpenny. That would not go far even in postage stamps and omnibuses; and she did want to go and see Mrs. Keene, who had never answered that last note of hers. When all was gone, could she ever force herself to ask her aunt for any more? No! she felt she could not. Was she going to be absolutely helpless? a kind of respectable captive. And Lionel's eyes! how they had terrified her that evening! Had she fallen into a trap? What a base, ungrateful idea; what

a low-minded creature she was growing! Her aunt was so kind and generous. But, oh! for a little bit of independence! Reason as she would, an awful sense of being in the toils pressed upon her; her heart beat as if it would burst. Should she see Jack and ask his help? No! If he were the *fiancé* of Dorothea Browne, everything would go to her, and through her to Mrs. Dallas. She was indeed without any help; and with bitter tears she prayed to God for courage and sense not to imagine horrors groundlessly, foolishly.

CHAPTER X.

GATHERING FEARS.

THANKS to bad weather, and his own masterly inaction, Leyton's "tea" in the studio was postponed till the last week in February.

It was a bright, clear day, and at the early hour of three, in order to secure light enough to see the pictures, Lady Shirland and Miss Browne drove away due north to reach the unfashionable quarter.

The studio was already occupied by two gentlemen guests, one of whom was a stranger to Dorothea. She was most carefully arrayed in dove-colour and brown, with an elegant little brown and gold bonnet, and a very becoming veil, beaded with gold, drawn effectively over her "pencilled" eyebrows, darkened underlids, and carefully powdered countenance.

"Very good of you, Lady Shirland, to come all this way for so little," said Leyton, meeting them at the door. "Miss Browne, I shrink from the

examination of your critical eyes. I know you are yourself an artist."

"Ah! Two of a trade never agree," said Lady Shirland loosening her fur-lined cloak.

"That is a libel! You and I always agree, eh, Miss Browne?" returned Leyton with a smile.

"Oh, yes, certainly! unless you assert very unorthodox opinions," returned Dorothea in a fluttered, "sweet seventeen" manner.

"Here is an old acquaintance of yours, Lady Shirland," resumed Leyton. "Mr. Wardlaw."

"Ah, yes! Delighted to see you, Mr. Wardlaw; have not seen you for ages! Where have you been hiding yourself?"

"Well, I have been to and fro between my friend Forrester's place and town. Now I am here for a couple of months, I shall have the pleasure of calling on you. Let me introduce Captain Cecil Forrester. Lady Shirland, Miss Browne!"

"I think we have met before, Captain Forrester," said Lady Shirland, "We were staying together at Glen Houlahan Castle for the Northern Meeting some years ago."

"Yes, of course, I remember," returned Forrester

with his usual cool, conventional politeness. "We had better have a look at the pictures while the light lasts; there are some nice bits here. I'm not much of a judge, I only know what I like. What do you think of this 'Autumn Morning'?"

"It is delightful!" said Lady Shirland, who had seen many galleries, and liked pictures. "The atmospheric effect is excellent, and those withered leaves lying on the water are so real, one is inclined to pick them up."

"It is right good," was Wardlaw's brief, hearty commendation.

"I am glad you think well of it, Lady Shirland," said Forrester, still looking critically at it, "for I am to be its proud possessor."

"I did not know you were such a genius, Mr. Leyton," murmured Dorothea softly. "Why do you hide your heart, your aspirations, so persistently from your friends, who would gladly sympathise with you?"

"What, Miss Browne, do you want me to go about telling every one what a deuced clever fellow I am?" asked Leyton, laughing.

"Ah, you are too contemptuous of your fellows

—too hard. I am afraid of you,” returned Dorothea, in the same low tone.

“Hard to *you*! Impossible! You might melt a pillar of stone,” he returned gallantly.

Dorothea trembled.

“But you are going to send this to the Academy, Jack?” said Lady Shirland.

“Yes, with Captain Forrester’s permission, I am going to try my luck.”

“I was just suggesting to Mr. Leyton—rather audacious of an ignoramus like myself—” said Forrester, “that he should paint, as a companion picture to this, ‘A Spring Evening.’ There’s a nice bit of woodland near my old house that would be the very scene for it. What do you say, Mr. Leyton?”

“It’s a good idea. I’ll come down to look at the place, and see what I could make of it.”

Then the examination of Leyton’s canvases went on: sunny bits from the banks of the Nile, where one felt the atmosphere palpitating with heat; shady English nooks; Highland streams brawling over rocks; Highlanders holding their hounds in leash; sheep with their attendant

colliers ; Egyptians of various classes ; English troopers, Soudanese natives, etc., etc. ; sketches of every description, but few finished pictures.

“ You certainly have not been idle for the last couple of years,” said Wardlaw to his host. “ Now you must make yourself known ; advertise, my dear fellow—advertising is the only means of success. Modest merit starves in a garret ; pushing self-assertion builds itself marble halls, and fares sumptuously every day. Organise an exhibition ; feed the critics ; give the fine ladies tea ; invite the masters ; butter up the big artists. There’s a great deal to be done besides good work.”

“ Thanks for your words of wisdom,” returned Leyton. “ Now, Lady Shirland, you must be exhausted. The light is changing ; let us have tea”—and he placed a couple of his best chairs by the table. “ May I trouble you, Miss Browne, to preside ? It is revolting to see tea poured out by a man.”

“ What a droll idea !” said Dorothea, taking the chair with a well-pleased smile. “ Pray, who takes cream and sugar ? ”

Then the usual chatter flowed freely—art gossip,

society, political, racing gossip, in none of which Leyton took much part, applying himself to pass round bread-and-butter and cakes, or handing a disgracefully black kettle which sang cheerfully on the hob of a not particularly well-kept grate.

Lady Shirland, hearing that Captain Forrester was looking for a house, entered into the question with great interest and gave him much good counsel, strongly advising a flat as so much better suited to a bachelor.

"But I may not remain a bachelor," said Forrester, stirring his tea.

"Oh, I beg you a thousand pardons!" cried Lady Shirland. "I did not know you were going to be married."

"Nor am I, Lady Shirland. I only contemplate marriage in the abstract."

"Then avoid a house until you catch your wife. If you choose it without her, she will probably refuse to live in it."

"Why should she object, if it is a nice house?"

"If it be not nice to she, What will she care how nice it be?" parodied Wardlaw. "Don't fancy you will have it all your own way when you

place 'Madame' at the head of your establishment."

"Among all the charming things you have shown us," said Dorothea, aside, to Jack Leyton, "I have not seen your group of Orientals reading the newspaper after one of the Egyptian battles."

"It is not here; I have sent it to a provincial exhibition."

"Is it sold?"

"No, not as yet, I believe."

"Ah, I should so much like to see it."

"How did you hear of it, Miss Browne? I don't think anyone has ever seen it except an artist or two—rough-and-ready fellows *you* could know nothing about."

"A little bird told me—a very sweet little bird, whose name is Myra."

"Myra Dallas!" repeated Leyton, looking roused and interested. "Then you have been kind enough to cultivate her. It is very good of you. I haven't seen her for an age."

"Well, Mr. Leyton, I have not seen as much as I should like of her. Mrs. Dallas always seems to want her to do this, that, or the other, and she

had a bad cold lately. She was to have dined with us about ten days ago, but her aunt thought it was wiser for her to stay at home."

"I have called more than once," returned Leyton, reflectively, and pulling his moustaches, "but aunt and niece were always out."

"Indeed! We thought Mrs. Dallas stayed too much indoors. Have you met young Mr. Ashby, Mrs. Dallas's son?"

"No; what is he like?" asked Leyton, with continued interest.

"A most charming young man; graceful, accomplished, and so handsome—in a dark Oriental style. He seems very nice to Miss Dallas; takes her out to concerts and to walk, quite in a brotherly way; and yet I should not think him the sort of man who would go in for Platonics."

"Platonics are all bosh!" said Jack abruptly. "So I suppose that on the whole Myra has a good time of it."

"Yes, very good, I should think. Mrs. Dallas is quite like a mother to her; can't bear her out of her sight, even to be with *me*. Is she not a charming, handsome creature?"

"She doesn't charm me. I should be afraid of the tiger's claws, which are, I suspect, sheathed in her velvet gloves. Besides, I can't bear dark women. My Venus must always be a blonde."

"Ah! my dear Mr. Leyton, you ought not to be prejudiced," cried Dorothea with a delighted laugh; "and I am sorry to hear you speak disrespectfully of Platonic attachments. I think that kind of pure and perfect sympathy must be so delightful, so elevating, so—so——" She stopped short for want of an epithet.

"I don't know anything about it," returned Leyton indifferently. "But I don't fancy it would elevate *me*. It might probably bore me. Then I am rather a low creature, and of the earth earthy."

"Perhaps you do not know yourself," said Dorothea, stealing a melting glance at him.

"Very likely I do not," returned Jack indifferently. "Then you have not seen much of Myra?"

"Very little, indeed. She is such a shy, plain little thing, that I do not suppose society or parties would give her much pleasure."

"Plain! Do you mean plain in looks?" asked Leyton in a surprised tone.

"Yes, so colourless, you know, and so odd, that is, so unconventional—isn't she, mamma?" to Lady Shirland who had risen to take leave.

"Who, Miss Dallas? Oh, I rather admire her; only she is looking dreadfully ill. I called on Mrs. Dallas yesterday, and I was quite troubled about her. Do you know, I think it is rather imprudent taking her to live in the house with a fascinating young man. They will probably take a fancy to each other; and, situated as she is, it is not very likely that Mrs. Dallas would consent to such a marriage for her son."

Leyton looked very gravely at the speaker.

"I can't fancy Mrs. Dallas playing the part of a benevolent, self-sacrificing parent," he said.

"Ah! there you are wrong, Jack," cried Lady Shirland. "Mrs. Dallas is really a kind and tender-hearted woman; more so than I once believed her to be. She nursed poor Colonel Dallas most devotedly during his short severe illness."

"Ah! You are speaking of Colonel Edward Dallas?" asked Forrester. "Well, I believe he *was* a very good fellow, and deserved well of fortune; but if he had not been carried off, why my position

would have been very different—that is, for some years to come, for he had no children to transmit the property to.”

“I don’t fancy the widow would let it out of her clutches,” said Wardlaw. “She had pretty well the whip-hand of Dallas, who was a capital fellow, but rather soft.”

“Come, Dorothea, we have trespassed too long on our kind host. Be sure you come to see us soon, Jack. I am always at home on Sundays; don’t forget, Mr. Wardlaw. Captain Forrester, if you will look in upon us, we shall be very glad to see you.”

“Perhaps you will let *me* have that picture of which we spoke, if it is not already sold,” whispered Dorothea.

“You must see it first, Miss Browne.”

The three gentlemen escorted them to their carriage, returning for a few last words to the studio.

“Did you ever know anything of Fred Dallas, the Colonel’s brother?” asked Leyton.

“Nothing. But I have heard he went to the dogs. We were both related in the same degree to old George Dallas: they on the father’s, myself

on the mother's side. I never saw anything of them. I did hear that Frederic Dallas formed some disreputable connection, and lived a queer life."

"I knew him well," interrupted Leyton; "a better man and a truer gentleman never lived. He has left one child, a girl, totally unprovided for."

"Ha! indeed!" exclaimed Forrester, and fell into deep thought.

"I knew him too, years ago," added Wardlaw. "He was an unlucky devil, but everyone liked him. Lady Shirland tells me the widow of Colonel Dallas has adopted the daughter. That looks well."

"It must be a serious addition to Mrs. Dallas's expenditure," observed Forrester.

"Well, I suppose she has no daughter of her own, so this girl may be useful to her," said Leyton. "Why, you are not going yet?"

"I think we must. You'll dine with me next Wednesday."

"Thank you, I will. Not necessary to wear swords and ruffles, I suppose?"

"No, by no means," returned Wardlaw smiling.

"Is it permitted to call on you in the morning?" asked Forrester. "I should like to have an

opportunity of speaking to you on one or two points."

"I shall be very happy to see you any morning," replied Leyton. "I have no model at present, so a visitor is allowable."

After a few words of adieu, Wardlaw and his ex-ward departed, and Leyton was left alone in the fast-falling shadows of closing day.

The fire burned low as he paced the room slowly, thinking over the fragments of Myra's present history which had cropped up in the desultory talk of his visitors. He was puzzled by the profound uneasiness which had taken possession of him. Myra, who for a few short weeks had seemed almost his own property, had been swept away out of his sight; a great gulf, widening and widening every day, had opened between them.

Myra's deep blue eyes seemed to look into his out of the gathering darkness, and his heart thrilled with a nameless, probably a fanciful, sense of some vague difficulty and danger hanging over her.

But such fancies were weak and womanish,

The present age, with its commonplace security, its general openness to the light of day, was not likely to witness mysterious wrong done to an unoffending girl, who was further safeguarded by her poverty and insignificance. Only, now as then, in the far-away gloom of mediæval confusion, there is a terrible power which neither laws nor police can check or regulate—the tyranny of mind over mind, from which none can deliver the victim.

Leyton had not been at all favourably impressed by Mrs. Dallas. He admired her greatly from an artist's point of view; he would have liked to paint a strong, deeply-coloured scriptural picture with her as a model for one of those grand, fierce Jewish women whose portraits stud the Old Testament at intervals like uncut jewels—Judith, or the wife of Jael, or Rebecca trying to cheat her own son. There was great power in her eyes; how could a slight, simple creature like Myra stand before her? Still, Myra had a sound Saxon backbone, and if she were in difficulty she must know that he, Jack Leyton, would help and befriend her.

“If I could do her any good, it would be worth having lived for through these weary, tasteless years,” was his conclusion as he threw himself into a chair and conjured up Myra’s face and figure before his mind’s eye. That turn of her head and throat, showing the sweet round of her cheek, and the delicate ear—how distinctly he saw it all! And then those blue eyes of hers that used to look so steadily, so kindly, so calmly into his; how unconscious of evil, and also of the hard realities of life, they were!

“Is it possible,” mused Leyton, “that I could make a fool of myself a second time?—that I could put myself on the rack again? Not if I can help it; though, if I did her no harm, what matter? I wonder if that woman Keene knows anything of her? She was very kind, I believe, and Myra had great faith in her—but I am drivelling. Why should I think evil of the widow Dallas? What possible motive but charity or regard for her late husband could induce her to adopt a helpless young waif like my old play-fellow? Still——” Leaving his meditations unfinished, Leyton rose, raked out the remains of

the fire, put on an overcoat, and sallied forth, locking the door behind him.

At a steady pace which got over the ground rapidly, without seeming hurried, he directed his steps south-east, across Regent's Park and past Portland Road Station, till he reached Keene's Private Hotel. Mrs. Keene was out, but expected in immediately; so, after a moment's hesitation, Leyton asked leave to wait for her. This was immediately granted, and he was shown into her private room, where a girl of seventeen or eighteen was writing at a small table in the window—a short, plump girl with a round, good-humoured face, reddish hair, worn in a thick, curly crop, and grey-green, wondering eyes. She was well dressed—that is, she had on good clothes—a very bright-coloured plaid frock, with a lace frill round her neck, fastened by a wide bow of decided blue; a fat, freckled hand held the pen, which she dropped in some confusion when Leyton was ushered in with a brief explanation, “A gentleman for your ma, miss.”

“Won't you sit down, sir? Gran'ma will be in directly,” she said hesitatingly, as she began to put her writing things together.

"Pray do not let me disturb you," returned Leyton, with a bow; "I fear I ought not to intrude, but I was anxious to see Mrs. Keene. I can return in half an hour."

"Oh, no; *do* sit down. It has turned so cold, and gran'ma won't be long," returned the young lady, who was fast recovering her self-possession. "May-be you are the gentleman about the second floor back?"—and she resumed her seat at the table, smiling amiably on her good-looking visitor.

"No, I am not. I called, hoping Mrs. Keene might be able to give me some information about a mutual friend."

"I daresay she can. Gran'ma knows *such* heaps of people—naturally, you know, in her position. Gran'pa too; he knows lots of quite swell people.

"Very likely," said Leyton.

"Gran'pa has been very bad for some time; he slipped coming on the pier from the steamboat at Dover, and twisted his ankle, so he was obliged to keep still. That gave him indigestion, and made him awful cross! But lots of people came to inquire for him—countesses and baronets, and one duke."

“Indeed !” said Leyton, properly astonished.

“Gran’pa is better now,” said the young lady, taking up her parable again. “He is able to travel; and he is going off next week with Lord and Lady Hargrave. They are an elderly couple, and waited quite a month for him rather than take anyone else.”

“Very gratifying,” said Leyton, rising to examine a water-colour drawing over the chimney-piece.

He thought he recognised the subject, and he now saw it was the same sketch Myra had taken with him of a corner of Hampstead Heath, only this was coloured—not badly done, by any means.

“That’s a pretty thing, ain’t it ?” asked his interlocutor. “That was done by a particular friend of gran’ma’s—*such* a sweet young lady. I love to see her come in. She is just like one of the young ladies in the *London Journal*—so elegant and gentle and distinguished-looking. Oh, here *is* gran’ma !” interrupting herself as Mrs. Keene came in, looking the picture of solid respectability in handsome black silk and a velvet bonnet.

“Eh, Mr. Leyton !” she exclaimed. “I am very pleased to see you, sir. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll

just put off my bonnet and be back in a minute. Wilhelmina, just you go up to No. 36. Miss Heartwell wants to speak to me. You'll do as well. And don't come back till I call you."

Mrs. Keene passed through the door which led to the private rooms of the family; and Wilhelmina, with a sweet smile, a nod, and a "Good afternoon, sir!" disappeared through the other.

Leyton continued to examine the picture. He could detect many faults; still, the colouring was wonderfully true, considering that memory must have supplied the tints.

"I wonder if she is strong enough to become an artist? In landscape, perhaps. It is not good for any human being to be utterly dependent on another; but it is deuced hard to get bread and butter enough with the brush, even for a man—as *I* know. Why, that young Forrester has given me the first good price I ever had in my life."

"Beg pardon, sir," said Mrs. Keene, re-entering. "I hope I haven't kept you too long. Please sit down. Now, it's curious. I have been wondering how I could get to speak with you for some time past. You see, I didn't know your address."

"I am glad I came, Mrs. Keene. It was rather a sudden thought. In short, I wanted to ask if you had seen Miss Dallas lately. Her father was a great friend of mine, and you see——"

He paused to choose the words in which he would explain the sort of responsibility he felt respecting Myra.

"Yes; I know, sir," she interrupted. "Miss Myra has spoken of you often."

"Have you seen her lately?"

"Not very lately, sir. She called about three—it might be four—weeks ago, and her aunt, Mrs. Dallas, came with her."

"I am glad to hear that," cried Leyton hastily.

"Well, I don't know," continued Mrs. Keene cautiously. "May-be you are a friend of the aunt's, sir?"

"No. I don't know her beyond having been once introduced to her."

"You see, it was no use her coming here with Mrs. Dallas. We couldn't speak a comfortable word. Indeed, Miss Myra hardly spoke at all.

Mrs. Dallas was sweet as sweet, and made me an elegant bit of a speech about my goodness to her dear niece, for which she would ever feel grateful. Then she said as how missie would never want nothing from anyone again, as she (Mrs. Dallas) had adopted her, and they were going to live happy ever after. ‘Unless, indeed,’ ses she, ‘Miss Myra deserted her aunt for a home of her own.’ And with that she smirked as if she knew a thing or two. But my dear young lady, she just looked white and dazed and sad, though she said she was quite well. Then she asked me why I had never answered her note; so I ses, ‘I never had a note from her, and often wondered I hadn’t.’

“‘But I *did* write to you,’ ses she.

“‘There must have been some mistake in the post,’ says Mrs. Dallas; ‘for it was posted all right. My son took it to the post, and *he* would be sure to be careful of any commission from Miss Dallas,’ says she.

“And altogether I felt as if she meant me to understand they were done with *me*. So *she* intended. Then they got up to go away, and missie says, in such a low, sad tone—

“‘You’ll take care of the picture for my sake, dear Mrs. Keene?’

“‘That I will,’ says I; ‘but I hope you’ll let me hear how you are going on now and again, for I love you dearly,’ says I.

“With that she looked at me as if she wanted to tell me something, and her eyes filled with tears.

“‘Good-bye, dear friend,’ says she, and put her arms round me and kissed me twice.

“When she did that I saw the aunt’s eyes glare at me, as if she’d tear out my heart and all it knew or suspected. It was just a moment’s glance—like a flash of lightning, showing all sorts of dangers—but it made me shake in my shoes. Then she says, sweeter than ever—

“‘Oh, yes; you shall hear of us. We are thinking of going abroad in the spring, and we may meet Mr. Keene in our travels.’

“With that she just nodded her head, as if to some low creature, and out she went. Miss Myra gave me another look out of her sad eyes, and I’ll never forget it. Then she went away, too; and it’s my belief I’ll never see her again.”

She stopped abruptly as if she could not command her voice any longer.

Leyton listened intently without interrupting her by a word, feeling annoyed with himself for being so impressed by the good woman's narrative.

"You have given me a very graphic picture of what took place," he said. "Pray, was it in consequence of this visit that you wished to see me?"

"Well, partly, sir. You see I cannot help feeling that Miss Myra is kept at that place against her will."

"I do not think there is anything to justify such a belief, Mrs. Keene. We must be reasonable. What possible motive could Mrs. Dallas have for detaining her niece against her will?"

"God knows, sir. But I felt it borne in upon me when I heard of that letter being posted by Mrs. Dallas's son, that he had just put it behind the fire. I may be wrong, but that's the thought that came to me. If it went wrong in the post, why didn't it come back from the Dead Letter Office?"

"Of course, a natural question; but even the

Post Office is not infallible, Mrs. Keene; and as there can be no possible advantage to Mrs. Dallas in undertaking the protection and maintenance of her late husband's niece, we have no right to suppose she is actuated by any motive save benevolence."

"Yes, that sounds all right and reasonable enough," returned Mrs. Keene; "but the minute you stop speaking the same doubts and fears come back to me, and they won't go away."

"It must be better for Miss Dallas, happier and more comfortable, to reside with her aunt, than to remain in that school?" said Leyton in an interrogative tone.

"It looks so, but—— I know the dear young lady seemed pounds better and happier when she was at school, even in holiday time, when she was all by herself."

Ah, that holiday time! How vividly it came back to Leyton.

"You knew Miss Dallas and her father in Munich, did you not?" he asked.

"Yes, I did, sir; and her dear mother, who saved my life, at the risk of her own, when Miss

Myra was but a baby. I'll never forget the debt I owe her daughter for her sake. She was the sweetest lady I ever saw, but sad-looking and delicate; she died about a year and a half after I left Munich. I've been there more than once since; I married Mr. Keene there; and I always wrote to Mr. Dallas, and then to missie when she grew older. I was grieved to hear of Mr. Dallas's death. Keene had been abroad with Lady Shirland that year, and he told me about Colonel and Mrs. Dallas visiting her ladyship; that's the way I came to know where Miss Myra was."

"Yes, I understand," said Leyton absently. "Then Myra's mother—Mrs. Dallas," he resumed, hoping to draw forth some remark, "died while she was quite young?"

"Yes, sir, while she was a baby. Did you know any of her people? They might be friendly to her daughter, for they must be real gentry, to judge by her."

"I know nothing whatever about them, I am sorry to say. Now, Mrs. Keene, I will leave you my address; don't lose it," giving her his card. "If you want my help in any way respecting Miss

Dallas, do not hesitate to send for me. But I think you—we disturb ourselves unnecessarily. No harm is likely to come to Myra. We live in the nineteenth century. I will call and see her. They have been out when I called before, so I must just try again.”

“Yes, so you may, sir,” gloomily.

“Come, come! don’t be too suspicious,” replied Leyton laughing. His laugh sounded hollow to himself. “When I *do* see Miss Dallas I shall report to you. I am very glad she has so kind and true a friend in you.”

He shook hands cordially with the good woman, and walked away westward from Keene’s Hotel in deep thought. “I seem to have come back to life and vigour, though my reason is still in abeyance, or I should not be so irritated by that simple soul’s ‘raw-head and bloody bones’ anticipations,” he mused. “They are absurd, of course. Yet I can’t throw off the impression she has made. I *must* see Myra. I can be of little or no use to her if I continue to lead the life of an ill-conditioned hermit. I’ll go to Lady Shirland and her nymph-like step-daughter. I wonder what the half-caste’s

son is like; a subtle, insinuating, dark-eyed dog, I daresay. I don't fancy Myra plunged into such surroundings; still, the Dallas widow would nip any tenderness between the boy and girl in the bud. I must not hold back. I must come out of my shell! And, by Jove! I've been such a beggarly beggar for these years past—beggared in love and life and hope—that I must have a new dress suit! Did I ever think I should go in for such vanities again! Hi! hansom! To Hill Street."

END OF VOL. I.

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